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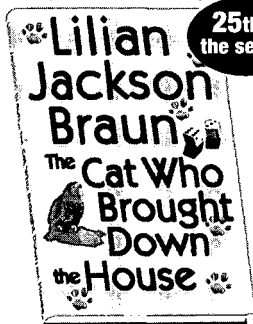
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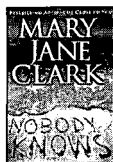
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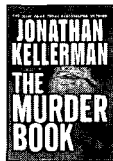
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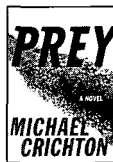
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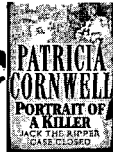
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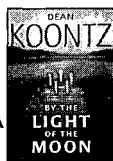
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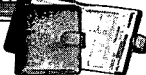
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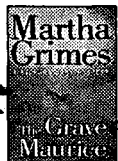
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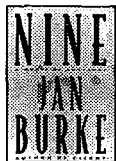
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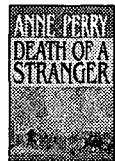
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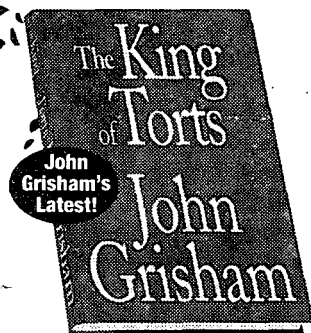
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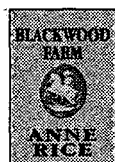
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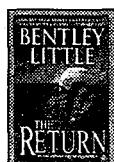
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EDITOR'S NOTES

Linda Landrigan

The mischief James Lincoln Warren relates in his historical tale "Miching Malicho" is based on a real literary mystery: the provenance of the play *Cardenio* attributed to William Shakespeare and John Fletcher. You'll notice that Mr. Warren pays particular attention to language in this story. He tells us, "A lot of verisimilitude for a period story comes from the use of the language." For the vernacular of the *ton*, he turns to the literature of the period, modeling dialogue, for example, on the plays and essays of Addison and Steele. "It took me two years before I was satisfied with the cadence of the language," he said, adding that his first stab at writing a novel "sounded like someone trying to imitate Agatha Christie and Jane Austen at the same time."

The wonderful thing about the eighteenth century is that it is extremely well documented. Mr. Warren gave us some contextual notes on *Cardenio* and other points when he submitted "Miching Malicho" to us a year ago. The notes are too long to print in this issue, but we thought they might be interesting to our readers, so we have posted them on our Web site at www.themysteryplace.com.

Looking forward to spring and summer, we bring you a number of stories that touch on sports or outdoor games. Our Mystery Classic, E. C. Bentley's "The Sweet Shot," revolves around golf. A riotous treasure hunt in "Bringing in Blossoms" by Dan Crawford draws out the town.

Joining us for the first time this month is Vicky Woodward,

LINDA LANDRIGAN, Editor

JONAS ENO-VAN FLEET, Assistant Editor

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whose story "The Southpaw Bleus" combines her love of baseball and her love of mystery. "If the TV is on," she tells us, "it's on a baseball or basketball game." Ms. Woodward is a journalist and an attorney.

D.A. McGuire continues to flesh out Carie Drew, a.k.a. Melanie Wilkerson, in her new story, "The Solomon." She introduces a new character, wary Detective Mac Johnson, in an uncomfortable encounter with the lonely, cautious recluse that begins when a boat is scuttled on the rocks in the coastal waters off the lower Cape Cod town of Westfleet.

Army C.I.D. agent George Sueño has a sad, shocking tale to relate in Martin Limón's story "The Filial Wife" of a murder in rural Korea and an ever-widening circle of victims.

Congratulations are due to several AHMM authors. Ceri Jordan's story "Rough Justice" (July-August 2001) has won a Shamus Award for Best P.I. Short Story from the Private Eye Writers of America. Jan Burke's story "The Abbey Ghosts" (January 2001) won a Macavity Award for Best Mystery Short Story presented by members of Mystery Readers International. Anne Weston's story "Beyond the Lost Man Mountains" (July-August 2001) was nominated for a Herodotus Award given by the Historical Mystery Appreciation Society. These awards were presented during the thirty-third annual

Bouchercon World Mystery Convention that was held in Austin, Texas, last October.

David Edgerly Gates's story "The Blue Mirror" (December 2001) was selected for inclusion in Houghton Mifflin's series *Best American Mystery Stories 2002*, edited by James Ellroy and Otto Penzler.

And sadly, we note the passing of two of our authors. Last September, Lloyd Biggle, Jr. (1923–2002) passed away. A musicologist, Mr. Biggle was a prolific science fiction writer—his latest novel, *The Chronocide Mission*, was published by Wildside Press last spring—as well as an engaging mystery writer. His books *The Glendower Conspiracy* and *The Quallsford Inheritance* were both Sherlock Holmes mysteries. AHMM published a number of stories from his Lady Sara Varnley series, most recently "The Case of the Fractured Puzzle" (September 2002). We will have another Lady Sara Varnley story of his in a future issue of AHMM.

Charles Sheffield (1935–2002), a physicist, also mastered the two genres of science fiction and mystery. In January, we published his story "The Demon of E Staircase," featuring the historical figure Erasmus Darwin, whom he brought to life in series of stories. A collection of his Erasmus Darwin mysteries, *The Amazing Dr. Darwin*, was published by Baen in 2002. He passed away in October of last year.

THE SOUTHPAW BLEUS

Vicky
Woodward



Fifteen minutes before Rhino Bleu died he told the locker room janitor to go out to his Viper and bring in his dry cleaning. "And don't gimme any excuses about your gimp leg," he was heard to say.

I sat in my office at the precinct of my new home in Mesa, Arizona. I was reviewing the notes I'd already taken during my investigation of the Rhino Bleu case. Seven, no—I flipped the pages—eight witnesses had attested to hearing Bleu make the statement "... don't gimme any excuses about your gimp leg" almost exactly as I had recorded it. Now that's what I call reliable evidence. One thing I've learned since my days at the academy more years ago than I care to count is that when eight people agree on anything, it's either the God's own truth or one hell of a lot of collusion.

I tossed out any suspicions of collusion when four of the eight told me they'd wanted to kill Bleu before they heard him say it and the other four told me if they hadn't already wanted to kill him, they did

then. There's a good reason why statements against interests are admitted in a court of law to verify hearsay. The only discrepancy I'd noted in their accounts was that three of the witnesses told me that Bleu had actually said, "And don't gimme any *crap* about your gimp leg." Close enough.

After offering the world his final words, Major League pitcher Rhino Bleu stepped into the shower and ended a twenty-one-year career with a fatal blow to the back of his skull. Did he slip and fall? Was he murdered? That was for me to figure out.

One thing I didn't have to figure out was who the victim was. Rhino Bleu. Left-handed pitcher for the Chicago Cubs. Seven-time pennant winner, four-time World Series champion, two-time Cy Young recipient (very early in his career), and one mean son of a bitch. I saw him pitch during the season the Yankees had him. It was the only season, counting from the first day my father took me to see DiMaggio lope across the outfield of Yankee Stadium, that I was ashamed to admit I was a Yankees fan.

Of all the pitchers I've seen in my day, Rhino Bleu was the meanest. Early on they labeled him wild, but I'm here to tell you the man had impeccable control. I suspect he threw all those wild pitches and walked all those batters on purpose to make it look like he didn't know where the ball was going. So then, when he'd take someone out, he'd shrug it off like he couldn't help it.

The first time I saw Bleu was at Yankee Stadium. Didn't take me more than a few plays to see his true colors. He was trying to throw Mandy Salazar out at first. Mandy was diving back to the bag and Bleu intentionally threw at his head! I couldn't believe he didn't get tossed out of the game. We Yankees like being known as tough, not as criminals. Never dreamed I'd see a play like that in the House that Ruth Built, on the field where Joe took those long stretching strides, so beautiful that the most beautiful woman in the world couldn't help but love him. When they traded Bleu away, I was never so happy to see a winning pitcher go.

The last time I saw Bleu was at the morgue. As awful as a post-mortem can be—and I don't care what cops in the movies are like, I've never gotten used to them—I always attend and take my own notes. Never know what you'll pick up during an autopsy. I've broken more than a few cases with lines the coroner intended to throw away. At one point during the Bleu exam, when Dr. Evans was trying to determine the angle of impact, he remarked off the cuff, "... like a batter trying to send his skull into the center field stands." I made note of the statement. But, the blow was also consistent with the back of Bleu's head smacking the concrete floor after slipping on a bar of soap, which was also found on the floor in the shower stall. My work was cut out.

The next morning I arose before dawn and drove out to Hohokam

Stadium to observe the participants as they arrived for another day of spring training. I parked near the entrance gate—which now, in the wake of a recent murder, checked every car entering the park—and waited and waited, a full Thermos of coffee and two bran muffins to help pass the time.

Let's face it—I'm too old for this. I should have quit when I had the chance. After thirty years plus with New York City Homicide, I retired last year with high praise and full pay. But the praise and the pay weren't enough to erase the pictures, ugly pictures, too many scenes from too many investigations into the dark side of human nature. The job may have been gone but the images remained—the streets held them—and I finally realized that me and mine and that grand old town needed to part company.

So last fall I packed up the lovely Reba Sinclair, wife of my youth, and moved to Mesa, Arizona. I never dreamed any place could be so clean. I fully intended to devote my remaining years to arresting the steady climb of my golf score, but I got restless. I started feeling useless, not good for much more than loosening lids and carrying groceries. One day I realized the high point of my week had come when Bowser and I ran into a yappy Chihuahua in the park. The next day I dropped by the local precinct. Two weeks later I had my own desk at the Mesa P.D.

Now Mesa is not Manhattan, and just when I was becoming satisfied with the idea that I might make it to my next retirement by throwing the book at parking offenders instead of murderers, old rat bastard Bleu comes to town with the Cubs for spring training and checks out in the shower. I surmise I got stuck on the case because I'm the only one here who's ever worked a high-profile murder. You figure out who offed a New York State senator or a Broadway producer or the head of the Mercadante crime family and you learn stuff they don't teach at the academy. Important stuff, like what happens when you punch out a member of the press (your hand hurts like hell for about three days).

I was just starting to feel the effects of the coffee and bran muffins when the cars began to arrive. First came the support staff—groundskeepers, trainers, physical plant employees and such. Then came the players. It was every boy and man's dream come true that I watched roll through the gate—Mercedes, Jag, Ferrari, Maserati. Brand spanking new, sleek and shiny. The only possible imperfection in that polished pageantry of chrome and fiberglass was Gordo Martinez's Porsche with its banged-in rear panel. Of course, I'd already been told about it, but all I could think when I actually saw the damage as Gordo pulled in was, *What was all the fuss about?*

I settled into the stands to spend my day watching grown men practice a boy's game.

I pulled out my dog-eared flip pad and began to study my notes. Most of the detectives on this college-boy squad use "personal digital assistants," little pipsqueak gadgets they poke with a stick. Give me a number two and a five-by-eight steno pad and things start to add up.

I reviewed the list of everyone known to be on the premises at the time of the great man's demise. It read like an autograph dealer's dream come true—Bucky Stillman, Gordo Martinez, Jo Jo Bishop, Chip Lott, to name a few. I could send my grandkids to college if I could get those guys to write their names on a piece of paper, but I'd never lower myself to ask. I don't care what it'd bring.

I drew a five-pointed star next to Bucky's name. Bucky Stillman, twenty-nine-year-old all-star shortstop with a bazooka for a right arm who could snag a line drive bouncer on the fly and fire it to first base before his body hit the ground. The only other player I'd want filling the gap besides Bucky might be Jeter, but just barely. I'd read in the papers that Bucky tried to get out of his contract when the Cubs announced they were signing Rhino Bleu. I recall Bucky even said he'd like to see Bleu dead. I didn't think he did it, but he was as good a place as any for me to start.

I got down to the locker room before the players arrived. It may have been the major leagues but it smelled like every locker room I'd ever been in—sweat, liniment, and the unmistakable scent of chewing tobacco. The only person in the place when I entered was the custodian. He scooted along on his knees, scrubbing the baseboards along the bottom of the lockers. Any seasoned detective worth the salt that seasoned him, and I put myself in that category, knows it's often someone like this—a janitor, a groundskeeper, a fly on the wall—who might deliver a piece of the puzzle that could come from no other source. I always make it a point to befriend the eyes and ears of the crime scene.

I sat down on one of the benches near him.

"How you doing?" I said.

The man glanced over and with a nod briefly acknowledged my presence, which I'm sure appeared a glaring contradiction in this inner sanctum of youth and power. He returned to his chore. I pulled my steno pad from my windbreaker pocket and flipped the pages. There I found, under physical plant employees, the words "John Oertli, 41, custodian."

"You John?" I asked.

He nodded again, this time without the glance.

"Ert-lee?" I said. "Did I get that right?"

"Yep," he said.

"What is that, German?"

He shook his head. "Swiss." He still hadn't looked my way again.

"I knew some Oertlis. From Wisconsin. You from up north?"

"Nope."

I knew the type and he was perfect. A man of few words. When men like that finally do speak, they usually say something worth hearing. I'd get his employment records from the office later, but I wanted to make a little small talk first.

"Where you from, John?"

"Killeen, Texas," he said, continuing with his work.

"Texas, hmmm." I never know what to say when someone tells me they're from Texas. Texas is like another planet to a native New Yorker. I couldn't think of a point of common reference.

"How long you been working at the stadium?"

"'Bout a month," he said. Long enough to have overheard what might have been said since spring training began.

"Well," I said, "I'm here to look into this Rhino Bleu business." Even though I knew the answer to my next question, I asked it anyway. I wanted to hear him answer. "As far as you know, did Bleu have any enemies?"

This made him pause and look my way. "Check out the white pages," he said. "Pick a name." Pause. "Any name."

"Yeah," I said, "but anyone in particular?"

He stopped wiping the lockers and gave me the once-over as if he might detect something about me. He started to stand, and I noticed he did so with some difficulty. I wondered if I should offer him some help. He reached out and grabbed the bench with one hand and his left thigh with the other and slowly pulled himself up. He kicked out his left leg several times as he straightened, rubbing his knee as he stood.

And don't gimme any excuses about your gimp leg. I remembered, Oertli was the one Bleu had sent to his Vipér before he died.

I repeated my inquiry. "Anyone who might have a story about Bleu?"

Oertli looked me dead-on as if I'd just been named crown prince of the ridiculous. He shook his head and let out a solemn laugh.

"Everyone you meet in this locker room is going to have a story about Rhino Bleu," he said.

As he finished speaking, I heard the locker room door burst open followed by the clickety-clack of cleats and the easy laughter of the players.

I didn't recognize the first two Cubs who entered the room, but behind them I saw the clean-cut, all-American, celebrity mug of Bucky Stillman. I stood.

"Bucky," I said, extending my hand. "Harry Sinclair, Mesa P.D."

Bucky and I met in the skybox lounge that loomed high above the stadium. It was a lavishly decorated affair with overstuffed leather chairs, carved oak paneling, and thick oriental rugs. A soft-spoken attendant served Bucky a bottle of beer and me a cup of coffee and then

graciously disappeared. Bucky was willing and ready to talk.

"I'll confess," he said. "I didn't kill him but I wish I had. I used to sit around and dream up ways to do it. Should I hire someone? Should I do it myself? I never would have gone through with it—at least I don't think I would have—that is, not unless Bleu did it again." I thought I knew what he was referring to, but I was glad he made it clear. "Not unless," Bucky said, "Bleu killed another player like he killed Peach."

When Bucky said the name "Peach" his demeanor instantly hardened. He clenched his jaw and pointed his beer bottle at me. "I don't care how it happened, Mr. Sinclair. Rhino Bleu killed Peach Stevens, just as sure as if he'd pulled the trigger himself."

I'd have had to have been on Mars the last three years not to have known what Bucky Stillman was talking about. When Bucky played for Montreal, one of his teammates lost his career at the plate when Rhino was pitching. Peach Stevens. Third baseman, played at Georgia Tech with Bucky. They won the College World Series together. Peach was nothing flashy—I wouldn't have put him on a rotisserie team—but you could depend on Peach not to blow a big play. He was nicknamed Peach not just because he was from Georgia but also because, as everyone said, he was a real peach of a guy. Never met anyone he couldn't get along with.

I was watching the game on TV when it happened. Peach got a double off Bleu in the first, and when he came back up in the fourth, Bleu hit him in the right elbow with a fastball and shattered the bone. It looked to me like Bleu had set him up, just like the time I saw him throw at Mandy Salazar's head at Yankee Stadium.

Peach couldn't come back that season. He couldn't make it at spring training the next year, and he washed out. The guy went into a deep depression and shot himself that summer during the all-star break.

Bucky went on a mad campaign to get Bleu kicked out of the league. I've seen Bucky on television in many an interview and press conference urging a criminal investigation and a lifelong ban of Bleu from baseball. "Pete Rose *might* have placed a bet," he'd say, "but Rhino Bleu killed someone." Everyone knew the stage was set when Bleu came to the Cubs.

"If I couldn't get Bleu," Bucky told me, "I'm glad at least someone did."

"We're not even sure yet if it was murder," I said.

"Yeah, right," Bucky said. He leaned toward me and gave me two exaggerated winks. "When you find out who it was that—" he paused and emphasized his next words, "*—didn't* kill him, let me know. I want to shake the bastard's hand." He took a long swig on his beer. "Even though I am pissed off he didn't make that sorry s.o.b. suffer."

On my way out I stopped at the Cubs' office to check on the employee

records I'd requested. They hadn't arrived, I was told by a pretty young secretary who reminded me of my granddaughter. She said they were being sent by courier and could be received at any time. I noticed she wasn't wearing a wedding ring, and I fought an avuncular urge to give her advice about itinerant professional athletes. I left my card with my home number and asked for a call as soon as the records arrived.

The parking lot was almost as empty when I walked out that afternoon as it was when I'd arrived that morning. Of the few vehicles remaining, most were standard-issue American fare, circa several models ago, but one luxury sports car remained. A shiny black Porsche that couldn't have left its German birthplace more than a few months before. It straddled two parking spaces not far from my Chevy. I could see two men standing next to the Porsche. I recognized only one of them, the car's owner Gordo Martinez. The other man was writing on a clipboard.

Gordo was raising quite a ruckus, yelling, pointing at the car, flailing his arms about wildly. I altered my route to the Chevy to try to catch what was going on.

"He refuse to apologize!" Gordo was screaming. "I ask the man, I say, 'You hit my car, you apologize to me for hitting my car.' And he refuse! He refuse to apologize!"

I'd already heard about this little squabble, but I figured now was as good a time as any to get it straight from the source.

"Okay. Well," the man with the clipboard said, "I believe I got all I need, Mr. Martinez. Here's your copy of the estimate."

The man tore off a sheet of yellow paper and handed it to Gordo. Gordo calmed down long enough to take the paper and look it over before he started screaming again.

"Two thousand one hundred dollars! Two thousand one hundred dollars!" Gordo held the paper up, folded it, and began tearing it into pieces. "No! No! This car cannot be repaired. I need a new car, a whole new car!" He threw the pieces into the air, and they fluttered gently down to the pavement in the breezeless evening.

"Hey," the guy said. "You'll have to take that up with the office. I was just sent to do the estimate."

"I do not care about your estimate! Since there is no apology, this car can never be repaired!"

"Okay. Whatever," the man said. "Uh, by the way," the man held out the clipboard to Gordo, "would you mind giving me your autograph? It's for my, uh, kid."

Gordo nearly lunged at him. "You take your board or I put it where you never want to touch it again!" Gordo tried to grab the clipboard but the man pulled away and began to backpedal quickly.

"We'll mail you a copy," he said as he ran for his car.

"You mail it to him!" Gordo shouted. "I don't care if he's dead, you

mail it to *him!*" He stomped on the pieces of the estimate that lay on the pavement.

I walked up to the outraged centerfielder and stood my ground, hopefully far enough out of harm's way, and watched as he bent down, scrambling to pick up little pieces of yellow paper. Lucky for him he was in Mesa and not in the Windy City.

"Gordo," I said, "you need some help there, buddy?"

As agile as a cat he stood and turned toward me, the torn paper in his hands. He was a monster of a man. I got a sense of how David must have felt when he first saw Goliath. Gordo was six four, but at two hundred and sixty-five pounds he looked much taller. Thickest body I've ever seen. His chest was like a bass drum, his neck as round as a telephone pole, and his forearms were bigger than my thighs. I didn't know humans could grow like this. My gaze locked onto those forearms and the thought went through my head that maybe you need arms that big to bat .345.

Gordo Martinez was looking at me like he was a bull and I was a piece of red cloth. He started to say something, but I could tell by the expression on his face that he changed gears.

"You're that cop," he announced.

"Yeah," I said, "I probably am. I'm Harry Sinclair, and I'm investigating the possible—"

"Then you investigate this!" He shook the pieces of paper at me. "This is a crime!"

I didn't always work homicide. I used to be on street patrol in the South Bronx and I know about stabilizing a situation. I said the magic words. "Why don't you tell me all about it?"

It happened the first day they met for spring camp, after a team meeting to establish the schedule and orient the boys to the stadium. Gordo was walking out to his car with some of the players.

"And Mr. Big Shot Rhino Bleu is in his ugly yellow car, and he just back into my car! Just like that! He just—" Gordo used his big body like a car to demonstrate. "—smash my brand-new baby. I have it five days before he smash it!"

I already knew the facts were not in dispute. Several people had witnessed it.

"He smash it! And then? He drive past me, right in front of my face, and he do not stop, he do not slow, he drive away and leave the place. He almost run over my foot!"

"The next day I say, 'You hit my car. You must pay.' And do you know what he say?"

There was no telling.

"He say, 'Call my agent. He report it to insurance.' Then he say, 'Get out of my face.' Can you believe that? He hit *my* car then he tell me to get out of *his* face?"

I didn't need to write any of it down; it was already in my notes. Half the team had heard this exchange.

"So I say to him, 'That is not good enough. You must apologize for hitting my new car.' And he say to me, 'I'm not apologizing to you, you stupid spic. Just give it to insurance.' And he walk away."

It was at this point, according to everyone I'd spoken with, that Gordo went nuts. He started screaming, "*Diablo! Hijo de puta! I'll kill you! I'll kill you!*" It took several players to hold him down. Bleu didn't even look back; he simply walked out of the locker room. I again wondered about old Rhino Bleu. No one ever expected Bleu to be politically correct, but with the percentage of Hispanics in the professional leagues, he throws a racial slur like that? What, was he possessed by the ghost of Ty Cobb?

"Now that Rhino Bleu cannot apologize," Gordo said, "I want a new car. I want his family to buy me a new car. The damage he cause can never be repaired."

I squatted down and looked at the marks on the Porsche. It didn't amount to much more than a little dent. Gordo Martinez is probably making fifteen, maybe twenty million this year; twenty-one hundred is pocket change to a guy like that. But still, I knew that wasn't the point.

"Do you know, Mr. Sinclair, in my country a man could die for such an insult?"

I drove the forty-five minutes from the stadium to my clean patio home in the clean Red Mountain residential section. Inside, Reba was on the phone. When she saw me she held the receiver out to me. I kissed her on the cheek and took the phone. It was the pretty young secretary. The employee records had arrived. The courier had turned out to be J. D. Philco himself, owner of the Chicago Cubs. He would be in town for a couple of hours and wanted to speak with me about the case. I kissed Reba on the other cheek and headed back to the Chevy for the forty-five-minute return trip to the stadium.

When I pulled into the parking lot I saw a long black limo in front of the ticket office. I was walking toward the limo when I noticed the darkly tinted front passenger window slowly gliding down. A man in a black suit and sunglasses called my name.

"Yeah?" I said cautiously.

"Mr. Philco would like to speak with you."

"That's why I'm here."

The words had hardly left my mouth when the back door opened, and another dark suit with dark glasses stepped out and gestured for me to approach the car.

I hesitated, then walked to the open limo door to get a better look at who or what was inside. The suit outside the car cut me off as if to frisk me. I immediately moved out of his reach.

"Yeah, I'm packing," I told him. "And if that's a problem, you boys can go on your merry way. I'm sure we can get a subpoena to speak with Mr. Philco."

I heard a deep voice come from the car. "That's okay, Roy. Let him in."

Roy nodded toward the car and graciously stepped back, gesturing for me to enter. I eased myself into the limo's spacious back seat, as big as the living room in my first Manhattan apartment. When my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw the main man himself.

J. D. Philco. Fit, trim, probably ten years my junior, he was what we used to call an international playboy back in the fifties. Last I heard he was paying alimony to five wives on three continents. He'd dabbled in Arctic exploration, Formula One racing, cross-Atlantic yachting, and now professional sports ownership. Under the limo's soft lights I could almost see the tarnish around the corners of his mouth from the silver spoon.

The windows were so dark and the limo so smooth that when it eased away from the curb I could hardly sense it moving. A clear glass divider separated us from the driver and the man on the right who had first spoken to me. The two men remained as still as statues. Roy stayed behind.

"I believe you requested this information." J. D. Philco held a thick, stuffed manila envelope out to me. I didn't fail to appreciate that his impeccably manicured hand could effect a very strong grip.

I took the envelope. "Nice of you to bring this, Mr. Philco, but it really wasn't necessary. We could have overnighted it."

"I wanted to speak with you personally, Mr. Sinclair, to let you know that all my private resources are at your service. Anything you need, just say the word. I'll have a jet and a pilot at Falcon Field tomorrow morning who will remain at your disposal."

This is why they put an old codger like me on the case. I'd already faced and conquered my three temptations. You should have heard what the Mercadantes tried to offer me. Sure, I would have loved a beach house in the Cayman Islands.

"Well, that's very kind, Mr. Philco, but—"

"Call me Jake."

"Jake," I said, "but—"

"There's no buts about it. I insist."

I recalled that very strong grip. I decided to just leave the offer on the table and move on.

"Whose decision was it to sign Bleu?" I asked.

"Mine," he said. "I take responsibility for every personnel decision on the team."

"That decision has drawn a lot of criticism."

"Mr. Sinclair," he said, "are you aware of what's happened to pitching in the major leagues of late?"

"I'm aware there's been a lot of hits in the past few years."

"Precisely," he said. "Great pitching has become a fond anecdote from the past. This season the Braves signed a player who lost twenty-five games last year with an ERA of almost 6.00. Gave him ten million. Twenty years ago that guy would have been given his walking papers."

"Why Bleu though?"

"Anyone who can get into the W column gets a chance."

"A twenty-three million dollar chance?"

"It was a bargain. At the beginning of last season, Rhino Bleu's fast-ball was clocked at 98."

I caught an unintended inflection in his voice, a slight emphasis on the word *beginning*.

"What was he clocked at the end of last season?" I asked.

"He wasn't," Philco said. "Bleu was injured halfway through the season and didn't pitch again."

"Shin splints," I said.

"Yes. I see you are an aficionado of the sport, Mr. Sinclair. So, you follow baseball?"

I didn't take his bait to delve into my personal habits. I've learned there are times in an investigation when being chummy works to my advantage and there are times when it works against me. I knew as sure as I was fat and happy that in conversations with J. D. Philco, I'd be best advised to keep it to just the facts.

"So you signed a forty-one-year-old lame pitcher for one year at twenty-three million dollars?"

"Shin splints heal with rest, and Nolan Ryan pitched until he was forty-six."

That's when it hit me. Something a sharp-eyed shamus like myself should never miss. As soon as our conversation turned to Bleu's pitching ability, J. D. Philco's eyes had started blinking at three or four times their previous rate. Nothing I could prove in a court of law, but it was enough to cue me into what he might know that I didn't. I took a chance.

"Mr. Philco—"

"Jake."

"Jake," I said. "What did Bleu clock at when he got to camp this spring?"

Not only did the eye blinking speed up, but Jake tried to conceal a hard swallow.

"We hadn't clocked him yet."

He was lying. Didn't matter.

"Let's just say," I said, "for the purposes of our discussion, that Rhino Bleu were still alive."

"If only it could be so."

"And," I continued, "let's say that for whatever reason his arm was

gone." I don't care how much money Jake Philco has, the man should never play poker.

"As you wish," he said.

"So far gone that he couldn't throw a pitch all season."

"Your hypothetical has lost all semblance of reality."

"We're just talking," I said.

"All right," he said. "He doesn't throw a pitch all season."

"How much would you wind up paying him between now and September?"

J. D. Philco looked up toward the roof of the limo pretending to calculate the numbers.

"We paid Mr. Bleu five million dollars when he signed with the Chicago Cubs. If he were still alive, we would owe him the balance of his contract."

"Eighteen million dollars," I said.

"That's correct."

"Even if all he did was sit on the bench?"

"Even if."

"But he's dead," I said.

"Yes, unfortunately."

"So how much do you have to pay him now?"

"The five million dollars we've already paid is non-recoverable. But since Mr. Bleu is deceased and cannot perform on his contract, we are not obligated to make any more payments."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"So you just saved yourself eighteen million."

"But I lost a pitcher and maybe a chance at the pennant."

"If his arm was gone, you're better off."

He didn't respond.

I continued. "You get to keep a lot of cash, and you're no longer looking at a team mutiny. It's possible you'd be a lot better off, wouldn't you?"

He took a long, deep inhale and released it slowly, almost as if he were trying to blow smoke rings with his own breath.

"Mr. Sinclair, I would never say I was better off due to a man's death."

I nodded and picked up the manila envelope. "Well," I said, "I need to look these over before the morning. Could you take me back to my car?"

He reached up and tapped the glass.

The next morning as I drove to Hohokam Stadium I was full of facts and figures about the employees of the Chicago Cubs organization but I was none the wiser as to how any of it fit into the death of Rhino Bleu. Nevertheless, I knew the key to unlocking the puzzle was in there

somewhere. I'd done this too many times not to know when I was looking at something I couldn't see.

John Oertli was outside the stadium when I arrived. He was repairing a hinge on the entrance gate. I kept being nudged with the notion that Oertli must have seen or heard something. I'd be lying if I said it was more than a hunch, but it added up all the same. I'd known since I was in short pants that rich people treat the John Oertlis of the world as if they were invisible.

I decided now was a fine time to continue to break the ice. I was formulating some opening friendly remarks for Mr. Oertli when I heard my name called.

I turned and looked into the early morning sun at the outline of a man walking toward me. I shielded my eyes to get a better look and slowly began to make out his features. Tall, thin, beginning to broaden in the middle. His legs moved at a brisk pace, but he was bent almost as much as my father who's nearing the century mark.

"Harry Sinclair?" he repeated.

This time I answered. "Yeah?"

Even with the strong backlighting of the Arizona sun I could tell he was younger than I'd initially thought; his slumped posture had made him seem older. He looked like I must have when I first reached Mesa, a northerner fresh on the Sunbelt. Khaki shorts, black socks, dress shoes, fresh sunburn, brand-new T-shirt—"Dune it in the Desert." What set this fellow apart from the typical tourist fashion statement was the sling on his left arm and the colorful remnants of a not-too-recent shiner. I've taken more than my share of pops, and from the remaining streaks of yellow and green running down his right cheek, this one must have been particularly bad. He carried a briefcase and had a newspaper tucked under his arm, and he had really, really white teeth.

"Mr. Sinclair. Hello." He stuck out his hand and gave me a firm handshake.

Something about his forced grin, those big white teeth, and his rush party demeanor made me feel he'd been formulating his own opening friendly remarks for me. I hoped this wasn't the impression I was about to make on Mr. Oertli.

"Jerry Johnson. *Chicago Tribune*." I half expected him say, *Damn glad to meet you!*

I nodded but I wasn't as blank as I must have looked. Jerry Johnson. I *had* heard the name, but where? I didn't read the *Tribune*.

"You may have seen my column," he said.

He handed me the paper which was folded with his column facing up: CUBS CRAWL OUT OF HIBERNATION. In his picture in the paper his teeth didn't look so big and white.

"Yes," I said. It was coming back to me. I had read a clipping of one

of his commentaries. It was in the Bleu file that the gals in research had compiled for me. The commentary, which had run when the Cubs announced they were signing Bleu, was as scathing an indictment of a man and his career as I'd ever read. I'd agreed with everything Jerry Johnson had written.

I handed back the paper. I tried out a little of my newfound Southern hospitality.

"What can I do you for, Mr. Johnson?" I said as if I didn't already know.

"I'd like to buy you breakfast," he said.

The bowl of low-fat oatmeal Reba had forced me to eat that morning already felt like ancient history. I accepted his offer.

We met at a diner on University Drive that provided plenty of cholesterol, coffee, and local color. I ordered the Western omelet with two sides of sausage. As long as my wife wasn't having me followed and watched, I figured I probably wasn't in any real danger.

He pulled a folder out of his briefcase and slid it across the table.

"It's a copy of my file on Rhino Bleu," he said. "You can keep it. It's nothing confidential. Clippings, articles, info anyone could get."

There's certainly nothing wrong with taking information like this, if it indeed came from the public domain. I reached out to take the file. Jerry held onto it for a brief moment.

"I'd appreciate it," he said, "if you'd keep me in mind if you find out anything you can . . ." he paused, "... share."

Maybe I would, maybe I wouldn't. I wasn't concerned about it. Back in New York I'd known plenty of Jerry Johnsons. They get a column at a big-time newspaper and start looking for a Pulitzer. The kind who thinks there should be statues to sports reporters instead of athletes, the literary critic who thinks he's more important than the novelist. But it was obvious to me this guy was good at what he did. He was aggressive and tough and not afraid to stick his nose into anything, literally, or so the condition of his face made it appear. I respected him for that.

I took the file.

"Thanks," I said. "So." I pushed my empty plate toward the edge of the table. "Who gave you that shiner?"

He didn't miss a beat.

"Whose murder are you investigating?" he said.

I laughed. I love guys like this. Don't pull any punches even though they take a few. "We don't know yet that it's murder," I said.

"Sure."

"You're telling me," I continued, "that Rhino Bleu punched you in the eye?"

"That's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

"And he broke your arm?"

He pointed to his side. "And two ribs, and . . ." He pulled his lips back and bared those big white teeth. Made me want to jump out of the booth. "I had to have my front teeth capped," he said.

I laughed again, harder this time. He didn't seem to mind.

"Rhino Bleu beat the ever-loving snot out of me!" he said.

According to Jerry Johnson, Bleu had followed him out of a club late one night and beat him up. There were no witnesses so Johnson couldn't prove anything. Bleu paid three girls to say he was somewhere else.

It was so typical of Bleu to beat someone up in a dark alley that I didn't doubt the story.

"Why you?" I asked. "So you wrote a column or two against him. Plenty of reporters have done that."

"But those other reporters didn't find out he had a dead arm."

His statement came at me so suddenly that I flinched. I was so mad I'd given myself away I could have sent myself to jail without the two hundred dollars.

My reaction didn't go unnoticed.

"You knew," he said. "How'd you find out?"

"I took a wild guess. My question is," I said, "how did you find out?"

"Have you talked to Mitch Stiles yet?"

"The Cubs' trainer?" I asked.

He nodded.

Mitch Stiles had been one of Jerry Johnson's snitches. Kind of like I was trying to set up with Oertli, Johnson had used Stiles to give him those choice tidbits only inconsequential insiders might have.

He was an easy mark for Johnson. Stiles was crazy about the lime-light—the fancy places, the local stars. Johnson would take him around Chicago, make him feel like he mattered. A few trips to Michael Jordan's restaurant, a couple of conversations with the big man himself, and Stiles would feed Jerry Johnson all the scoop he could swallow.

This year Stiles came up with a doozie.

It was during Bleu's contract negotiations. The Cubs had Bleu in for some weight work and conditioning. Mitch put him through strength tests—standard operating procedure. Rhino's left arm should have been stronger than his right, but it showed a weakness. Mitch mentioned it; Rhino shrugged it off. Threw too much the day before. As the training sessions continued, the arm didn't respond. Soon it became apparent that Bleu had some serious atrophy.

"He's damaged goods," Johnson said. "It's not an injury to bounce back from. He's lost it. Permanently."

Johnson was licking his chops. With Mitch's help he was going to sting Bleu hard and fast. But then, out of nowhere, Mitch started

singing a new song. Bleu was fine. Strong as ever. Nothing to worry about. Well, a bloodhound like Jerry Johnson isn't going to be thrown off the scent so easy. He started burning the midnight oil to find out what was really going on, but he was coming up with nothing.

Very little time went by before Mitch told Johnson he was going to open his own sports-themed restaurant.

"And guess whose name was going to be on it?" Johnson asked me.

Not that it was my call, but I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to go to Bleu's Backyard Barbecue except maybe to throw a few eggs at the windows.

Stiles didn't waste any time. He took out a personal loan for two hundred fifty thousand dollars; Bleu was going to ante up the rest. Stiles found a place, paid the lease for a year, and hired an architectural firm to start drafting the plans.

Then, as soon as the twenty-three-million-dollar contract was signed, Rhino Bleu suddenly didn't know anything about barbecue or Mitch Stiles or nothing.

"How'd you find out about all this?" I asked.

"Stiles called me. He was nearly suicidal. I had to talk him back from the ledge. And now, Bleu's dead."

"Stiles would have had to be a fool to kill Bleu with a paper trail like that."

"Maybe he wasn't thinking clearly. Mitch Stiles is a very angry man."

"Are you angry about what Bleu did to you?"

Jerry Johnson glanced down at his arm in its sling and looked back up at me with a knowing smile. "Oh, Mr. Sinclair." He spoke as if I were a child. "I didn't need to physically kill him. I was going to assassinate him in my column. When Rhino Bleu died it spoiled all my fun."

I went back to my office to review the file that Jerry Johnson had given me. I was impressed with his sense of organization. The items in the file, mostly copies of newspaper clippings, were indexed and arranged chronologically.

On the top of the stack was a picture of a freckled-faced, innocent-eyed, twelve-year-old Reinhardt Bleu with his parents after being named Temple, Texas Colt League Player of the Year. That family photo set me back a minute. Guess I was surprised someone like Rhino Bleu had parents. They didn't look like the type to raise a monster.

But I wasn't surprised that Bleu had been a young phenom. I flipped through page after page of glowing accolades, broken records, showered praise, first team all-this and first team all-that, all before he even reached high school. Maybe Bleu's soul had turned black as

he traveled life's bumpy highway, but, I have to admit, the guy had had the stuff.

I turned to the next page. A picture of Bleu, eighteen years old, big and smiling, was superimposed over a blow-up of the Texas state map after Bleu's high school team won the State 5A Baseball Championship. A circle was drawn around Bleu's hometown of Temple. What I saw inside that circle nearly made me drop my upper plate. The piece I'd been looking for, half an inch away on the Texas map from Temple. I was out of my chair and down the hall to administration.

"Call the airlines. I need transportation—today."

A young brunette picked up a pencil and began to write my instructions. "Call the airlines," she repeated.

"And," I said, not wanting my thoughts to get away, "get a hold of the last five teams Rhino Bleu pitched for and see if they ever had an employee named John Oertli. If they didn't, see if Oertli ever applied to work for any of them."

"Got it," she said. "When did you want to leave?"

"Today!"

I arrived in Killeen, Texas, late that night. When I got to my hotel room I had a call from the brunette in administration. John Oertli had applied to work with both the Mariners and the Padres, the last two organizations Bleu was with. Oertli had been trying to get the opportunity. I knew the who. Now I just needed the why.

I was at the front doors of the *Killeen Daily Herald* when it opened the next morning. The archive librarian led me to the section of microfilm from the mid to late seventies and showed me how to thread it through the reels. I had a hunch my research wasn't going to take long, and this was one hunch that quickly proved itself true.

He, too, was a young phenom. Records, awards, accolades, praise. There was talk about skipping college, about going straight to the draft, but Coach Gustafson at the University of Texas got him. A full ride for a local boy was almost unheard of for Gus, but he needed a good shortstop. John Oertli of Killeen, Texas, was his man.

The story that broke the case also broke my heart.

It was the Texas State Championship semifinals. The Temple Wildcats versus the Killeen Kangaroos. Bleu was pitching for Temple; Oertli was batting cleanup for Killeen.

Second inning. Oertli's at the plate. First pitch. Oertli rips a line drive over the left field fence. It clears the barrier so fast the left fielder doesn't have time to turn around. No ifs, ands, maybes, or buts; it's just gone. One run scored.

Oertli comes back up in the fifth. First pitch is a ball, outside, but just barely. Second pitch. Ball. Far outside. Totally wild. Looks like Bleu is losing control. Oertli scoots in, crowds the plate. He wants a piece

of it. Bleu goes into the windup. The third pitch comes in hard and fast, on the inside.

The ball caught Oertli in the left patella and shattered his kneecap, causing damage to the bone structure underneath. The doctors predicted he'd walk with a limp the rest of his life.

Temple wins 2-1.

It was a day so beautiful I was almost glad I'd left the Big Apple. Wildflowers carpeted every open space with color, and the desert cactus had started to bloom. The papers said the streets of Manhattan were carpeted with ice and slush. I took a deep breath of clean, warm air. Maybe life wasn't so bad after all.

I arrived at Hohokam Stadium in time to watch the players struggle one by one out onto the practice field. When I was certain they were all accounted for, I went down to the locker room.

John Oertli was sweeping the room when I entered. I didn't say a word. I sat down on the bench, reached into the pocket of my windbreaker, and pulled out a bag of peanuts.

"Care for some peanuts, John?" I asked.

He didn't look up. He shook his head and kept sweeping, favoring that left leg as he went. "No. Thanks."

I cracked into a couple, popped the kernels in my mouth, and made sure not to drop the shells on the floor. The man had enough coming his way to have to sweep up my peanut shells.

"One thing I love about baseball," I said. "Peanuts."

He reached down and picked up some dirty towels.

"You like baseball?" I said.

His sweeping paused only briefly.

"It's okay."

He continued with his chore.

"You spent much time in ballparks, John?" I asked.

"Here and there."

I cracked a couple more peanuts.

"I understand that was quite a homer you hit against Temple."

He stopped. He didn't look at me, just came to a standstill.

"State championship semis," I said, "second inning, line drive over the left field fence." I didn't know what kind of response I'd get.

It was equally obvious he didn't know what kind of response to give. He turned, looked at me as though trying to decide. He made a series of facial gestures, as though scrolling through a list of possible comebacks. He looked like a third-base coach sending subtle baserunning signals.

Finally he gave it all up and stared at me, waiting to see what happened when the axe officially fell.

"Too bad about your career," I said. I looked down and peeled an-

other peanut, careful to toss the shell back into the bag. "Nothing more heartbreaking than to see a great talent unjustly denied its day."

I could sense a weight drop from John's shoulders. He leaned against the broom. He looked light enough to be swept away himself.

He closed his eyes and released a deep, slow breath. "You can't even imagine," he said. "It's been tough."

I nodded. "Well, I won't keep you any longer." I stood up and tucked my bag of peanuts in the pocket of my windbreaker. I started to let myself out of the locker room.

"Wait," I heard him say.

I turned.

"It wasn't just revenge," he said. "He was causing too much damage to the game."

This time I didn't know how to respond, because I agreed. We stood staring at each other, no longer detective and suspect, but just two fans lucky enough to be in a Major League locker room.

"You may not understand this, Mr. Sinclair," he said, "but I love baseball. I love it something awful."

I understood.

"I know what you mean, son. I know what you mean."

I haven't been back to Hohokam Stadium since, nor have I seen John Oertli.

I went home that day and sat in a lounge chair on my back patio, the Bleu file on my lap and the lovely Reba Sinclair to my side. I wasn't certain yet of what to do about the Bleu case, but I was certain of one thing—I wanted to put the whole ugly business out of my mind, at least for a while. I wanted to sit, to be with my wife, and to contemplate the big blue sky and the pastel shades in the distant hills. And there, as I relaxed in the dry desert air, I felt like me again, me from a long time before. No longer a tired old detective, but just a man, a man who had finally found his place. Maybe sometimes things really do have a way of working out on their own.

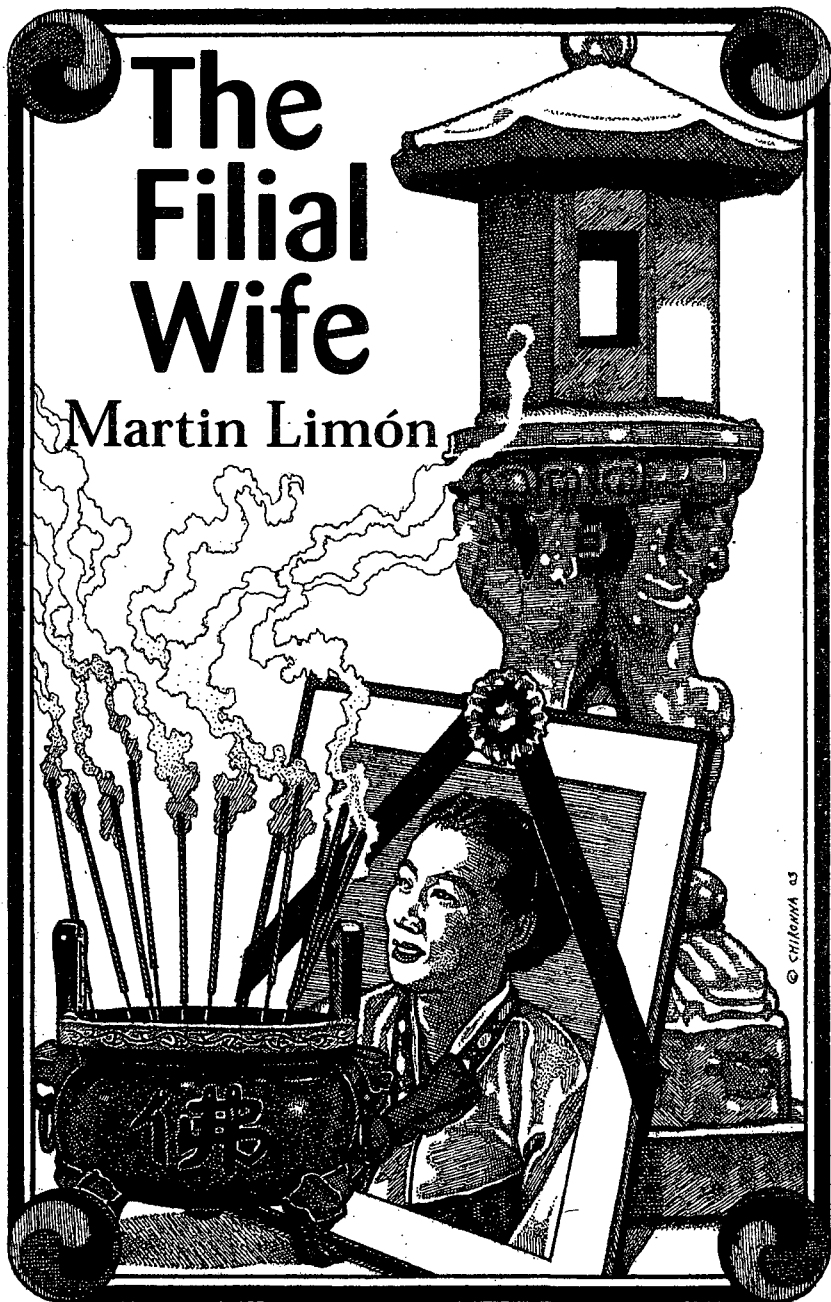
I marked the Bleu case an accident and closed the file.

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FICTION

The Filial Wife

Martin Limón





Before dawn on the last day of her life, Mrs. Yi Won-suk rose from her sleeping mat beside her husband, washed her face, and slid back the oil-papered front door of her home. She stepped out into her plot of about one half *pyong* in which she had been tending twelve rows of *peichu*, the thick-leaved cabbage that the people of Korea soak in brine and use as the prime ingredient in *kimchee*, their spicy national dish.

After her husband rose and trudged off to his fields, Mrs. Yi's daughter, Myong-song, wiped her sleepy four-year-old eyes and joined her mother in the field, making a pretense of holding a flickering candle so her mother could see more clearly as she slashed at the bases of the fat green cabbages.

As dawn broke behind Palgong Mountain, Mrs. Yi continued to work, tossing the heavy heads of *peichu* into her wooden cart. After she'd plucked all the ripe leafy vegetables from the earth, she took Myong-song by the hand and together they washed and changed into freshly pressed skirts and woolen blouses and bright red head scarves.

Myong-song climbed atop the pile of *peichu*, Mrs. Yi grabbed the handle of the cart, and together they walked through the first glimmerings of golden sunrise in the Land of the Morning Calm, heading for the produce market in the city of Taegu.

Today, mid-November by the Western calendar, marked the

beginning of *kimjang*, that time of year when Korean housewives buy large piles of ripe *peichu* and prepare enough cabbage *kimchee* to last throughout the cold winter. Sales in Taegu were expected to be good. Mrs. Yi needed the money to supplement the earnings she and her husband made from the backbreaking work of tending their rented fields of rice and soybean.

As Mrs. Yi and Myong-song entered the outskirts of Taegu, three-wheeled trucks and early morning taxicabs swished by on the narrow strip of blacktop that was the main road leading into the city from the west. Straddling the entranceway to the Taegu Market stood a huge wooden arch with fancy lettering welcoming one and all. Mrs. Yi pushed her cart past enormous glass tanks full of wriggling mackerel, past rows of snorting pigs and honking geese, and piled rolls of wool and cotton and silk. The entire market area was laid out like a giant squid in the center of the city of Taegu, with overhanging balconies and eaves and lean-tos made of canvas and bamboo blocking out the sun. Mrs. Yi finally jostled her way through the crowd until she reached the produce area and the stall of the mother-in-law of her husband's second cousin. The elderly woman smiled and greeted Mrs. Yi and hugged Myong-song and soon enough space was cleared on the raised plywood platform. Mrs. Yi piled her iridescent green cabbages along-



side mounds of round pears and red persimmons and jumbled green beans and all the earthly bounty that the fertile southern valleys of Korea offer in such abundance.

Myong-song played, the women chatted, Mrs. Yi sold most of her cabbage at a good price, and for the last day of her life they tell me she was happy.

My partner, Ernie Bascom, held the photograph up toward fluorescent light. His lips were pursed and there was no apparent emotion on his face. Behind the round lenses of wire-rimmed glasses, however, his green eyes glowed.

"Nice chest on her," Ernie said finally.

Mrs. Yi Won-suk, like most petite Korean women, was about as flat chested as it is possible to be. Still, she was beautiful. The photo was taken at a resort area. She stood by the shore of the Naktong River, vamping with some of her girlfriends on an outing just before she was married some five years ago. Her face was calm and unblemished, with full lips and a smoothly rounded nose and eyes that were bright and cheerful. Her legs were straight and the calves, revealed by a short skirt, were full and round.

My name is George Sueno. Ernie Bascom and I are agents for the Criminal Investigation Division of the 8th United States Army in the Republic of Korea. We are stationed at the C.I.D. headquarters in Seoul, but for

this case we'd been flown down to Taegu by chopper, mainly because the 8th Army provost marshal was worried that once the Korean newspapers got wind of what had happened to Mrs. Yi, the proverbial waste would be splattered all over the Korean tabloids.

I took the photograph out of Ernie's hand and slid it into the neat dossier that the Taegu detachment of the Korean National Police had prepared.

Our host was Lieutenant Rhee Han-yong. He'd picked us up at the military helipad and transported us over here in a police van, sirens blaring, until we reached this red brick police headquarters building in the heart of downtown Taegu.

Lieutenant Rhee pulled out a pack of cigarettes, Turtleboat brand, and offered one to me and then Ernie. We both declined. Lieutenant Rhee had the weathered face of a cop who'd spent many years standing on a round platform directing traffic. Now he directed a homicide squad. Smoke swirled past his flat nose, causing his eyes to squint.

"G.I.," he told us. "Must be. Other foreigners live in Taegu we already check."

"They had alibis?" Ernie asked.

"Yes. Alibi. Good alibi. Very good."

"What kind of alibis?" I asked.

"Two Peace Corps workers. That day they take go mountain somewhere. Also five priests. How you say? *Chondu-kyo*."

"Catholic," I said.

He nodded. "Yes. Catholic.

Everybody say they inside church that day."

Taegu is a city of about a hundred thousand people. It sits in the central valley of South Korea and is responsible for more than half of the country's output of exportable produce. Few foreigners live in Taegu because there are few business opportunities. The big industrialized capital of Seoul gobbles up most of those, along with the dynamic seaport of Pusan to the south.

That meant that the main source of foreigners living in Taegu was accounted for by the U.S. Army compound, Camp Henry, headquarters for the 19th Support Group. I'd already checked before Ernie and I left Seoul. Camp Henry was home to about fifteen hundred G.I.'s. A decent-sized pond for a criminal to swim in.

Forensic science is not the most highly developed art in Korea. In fact, it has not developed very well here at all. Why? Because with the Park Chung-hee government firmly in power and the Cold War raging and President Nixon and now President Ford providing total backing to the Park regime, the Korean National Police enjoy the luxury of solving crimes with methods more traditional than forensic.

A judiciously employed rubber hose is one example. A sucker punch to the stomach another. But in this case those crude techniques wouldn't do much good.

No suspect was in custody.

Why were the K.N.P.'s so sure

that the perpetrator had been a foreigner? Two pieces of evidence: the semen and the pubic hair. The semen showed a blood type of O positive, extremely rare amongst the ancient and largely homogeneous tribe that occupies the Korean Peninsula. And the pubic hair was obviously Caucasian. Short, curly, light brown.

Because of this evidence, the Korean National Police had requested our presence to help them find the G.I. who had raped and then murdered Mrs. Yi Won-suk.

When a married woman is violated and then strangled, right in front of her four-year-old daughter, it is bad enough. But when that unspeakably hideous crime is perpetrated by a foreigner, then it becomes intolerable. The K.N.P.'s would go to any lengths to nab the killer. But their long arm didn't reach into the inviolable sanctuaries of U.S. Army compounds.

That's where Ernie and I came in.

"I need to see the site," I told Lieutenant Rhee.

"You no go check compound?"

"We'll check the compound and we'll find the G.I. who did this. But first I see the site."

Ernie nodded his agreement.

Lieutenant Rhee glanced back and forth between us, not liking the idea. Finally, he sighed and stubbed out his cigarette. As he stood to his full height, he straightened his wrinkled khaki uniform and said, "*Kapshida*." Let's go.



Lieutenant Rhee, like most Korean cops, didn't want the 8th Army C.I.D. interfering in his operation. What he wanted us to do was the same thing the powers that be here in Korea wanted U.S. military police to do. Control G.I.'s. Slap them down when they became unruly and particularly when their wild ways caused grief to Korean civilians.

Not that the Korean government wanted us gone. Quite the contrary. The U.S. military presence here was not only coveted, but treasured. Memories of the Korean War still lingered and the Communists on the northern side of the Demilitarized Zone were massively equipped by the Soviet Bloc, fielding a standing army of over seven hundred thousand soldiers. South Korea's army could hold the northern troops off for a while, but in a prolonged conflict, the naval and air support of the U.S. would prove indispensable.

The Koreans needed us here, for their very survival.

But sometimes those of us assigned to defend their country—especially young G.I.'s far away from home and far away from everything that made them civilized—could prove to be a royal pain in the butt. Like when they became drunk and unruly and brawled with whoever happened to be in their way. Or when they drove their tanks and their armored vehicles too fast through sleepy, straw-thatched-hut villages. Or when they treated Ko-

rean women as if they were dolls to be toyed with and then discarded.

We ducked through a rickety wooden gate and entered a small courtyard. Earthen jars, probably filled with winter kimchee, lined the wall to the right. On the left, chicken wire housed a skinny white rooster who was busy scratching the earth. Flagstone steps led to a raised wooden platform that served as the floor of the hooch. In front of the sliding door sat an old woman. The neighbor, Lieutenant Rhee told me, and the first person to hear the four-year-old Myong-song when she burnt her hand and started wailing.

I nodded to the old woman. With sad, wrinkled eyes, she nodded back.

Next to her, leaning against a pedestal, was a large photograph of Yi Won-suk bordered in black. In front of the photo stood a short bronze incense holder.

Cops at a murder site are not expected to participate in ritual behavior. I could tell by his body posture that Lieutenant Rhee wanted me to keep moving. But rules had been broken here. The K.N.P.'s had allowed this old woman to set up this shrine to the dead not more than a few feet from a police crime scene. The K.N.P.'s had allowed their own rules to be broken not only out of respect for the dead but also because of the age of this mourner. Old grandpas with poor eyesight can totter across busy intersec-

tions in Seoul, against the red light, and cops with whistles will stop traffic and make sure that younger drivers swerve safely around the old man. To ticket a venerable elder for jaywalking would be considered the height of impropriety.

And no one had had the heart to shoo away this sad old woman either.

Ernie was already slipping off his loafers in front of the raised floor, but I didn't join him. Instead, I approached the old woman, bowed, and spoke in Korean. "I'm very sorry for your trouble, Grandmother."

She cackled. Surprised to hear a foreigner speak the tongue of the gods.

"No trouble for me," she answered. "Trouble for the young Mrs. Yi. And more trouble for her husband. And for their child, Myong-song."

"Yes. For my country's part in this, we are greatly ashamed."

"Good for you. But don't waste your breath on a foolish old woman."

"Did you see the man who did this, Grandmother?"

"No. I heard Mrs. Yi return from the market and push her cart through the gate, but after that nothing. Apparently Myong-song was asleep from the long ride home. All was quiet, so I went about my business until about an hour later. Then I heard Myong-song scream."

"And you came over here?"

"Yes. Myong-song was a quiet child. I'd never heard her scream

before. I found her in the kitchen. Apparently her mother had taken a pot of warm water off the charcoal brazier, but she must've been interrupted because she left the flame exposed. Myong-song reached in and burnt her hand."

"And her mother?"

"In the back room." The old woman shook her head. "Don't ask me more. That young policeman knows everything."

I thanked the old woman, slipped off my shoes, and stepped into the silent home.

The front room was wallpapered but barely furnished. Only a small wooden chest with brass fittings and a stack of sleeping mats and folded blankets sat neatly against the wall. The floor beneath my feet was still warm. Apparently, the old neighbor woman had been good enough to change the charcoal for the heating flues that ran beneath the stone foundation. The late Mrs. Yi must've been a good housekeeper. The floor's vinyl covering was scrubbed immaculately clean.

We entered the kitchen. Pots and pans hung from the wooden rafters. No sign of struggle. Only an open charcoal brazier that had now died out. The metal lid had not been replaced. Surely the old woman was right. When Mrs. Yi Won-suk pulled the pan of hot water off the open charcoal flame, someone must've jumped her from behind. Someone huge. Overpowering. She wouldn't have had a chance to struggle. Yet someone who was stealthy

enough to tiptoe past the sliding door and across the vinyl-floored front room without being heard. Or if she had heard him, maybe Mrs. Yi thought it was her husband returning early from the fields.

We entered the back room, where Mrs. Yi had been taken. Again, no sign of struggle. A small table in the corner with a mirror, bottles and jars of ointments and lotions, all undisturbed. Maybe the man had threatened Mrs. Yi with a knife. Or worse yet, threatened to hurt her daughter.

Lieutenant Rhee pointed to the center of the floor.

"The body was found here," he said in Korean. I translated for Ernie.

Then he told us that her skirt had been pulled up, her long underpants and leggings ripped off, and that the doctor who examined her corpse found enough tearing in her small body to conclude that she'd been violated forcibly by a powerful man.

Lieutenant Rhee pointed to his own neck. Bruises, he told us, had formed a line beneath the curve of Mrs. Yi's delicate jaw.

For the next two days, our work at Camp Henry was routine. After a while Ernie and I started to feel like a couple of personnel clerks. The officer corps on Camp Henry was under orders to account for the whereabouts of every soldier in every unit under their command on the afternoon of the murder. Hundreds of soldiers were eliminated almost immedi-

ately because if there's one thing the army's good at it's keeping track of G.I.'s. Support activities are what soldiers do on Camp Henry, so Ernie and I spent a lot of time making phone calls to ensure a truck convoy had actually reached its destination or that a piece of communications equipment had actually been repaired on the day in question.

Our progress was rapid. We were scratching off whole blocks of names and narrowing down our suspects to a short list. We didn't stop with the enlisted men, we also checked on the officers and even the three or four dozen U.S. civilians employed on the base. The entire process became more and more exciting as each and every alibi was checked and the list grew smaller and smaller. Finally, at the end of the second day, Ernie and I compared notes and to our horror we obtained the one result that neither of us had expected.

Everybody had an alibi.

We sat in stunned silence for a while, drinking the dregs of the overcooked coffee in the pot in the small office we'd been assigned.

Finally, Ernie spoke. "How the hell are we going to break this to 8th Army?"

"I don't know," I said. "The Korean newspapers have been all over it."

The original thought that only the Korean tabloids would carry the story of the sordid murder of Miss Yi Won-suk had long since gone by the boards. Koreans have an affinity for the simple country



life. Even though nowadays they work in high-rise office buildings or fly back and forth to Saudi Arabian oilfields or cut deals with Swiss bankers, they still think of themselves as the pure and virtuous agrarian people that their ancestors had once been. Mrs. Yi was so attractive, her surviving daughter Myong-song so charming, and her husband so stalwart and brave that the heart of the country had been drawn to their little family. The biggest newspapers in the country had run her photograph on the front page. Television reporters had produced specials on her, showing the craggy peaks and streams near her home. Some of them had even tried to talk to Ernie and me, but so far we'd managed to avoid them.

Finally, Ernie and I decided to do what we always do when we don't have a plan. We locked up the little office, strode outside the gate of Camp Henry, and headed toward neon.

When I woke up, I didn't know where I was.

What I did know was that my stomach was churning and my head ached and my bladder was so full that I was afraid to move. Finally I did move. I threw a silk-lined comforter off my body, rolled over onto a warm *ondol* floor, and slowly rose to my feet. I was in a rectangular room not much bigger than a closet. I found my clothes and threw them on and pulled back the sliding door, stepped out onto a narrow wood-

en porch, and squatted down and put on my shoes. The courtyard wasn't much bigger than the room I'd been sleeping in. The sky was overcast and a light sheen of drizzle filled the sky. Quickly, I stepped across moist brick to the *byonso* on the other side of the tiny courtyard.

After I relieved myself, a woman with a pocked face and hair in mad disarray and a cotton robe wrapped tightly about her slim body stood in the center of the courtyard waiting for me. I had no idea who she was.

She told me. I gave her the money that I had apparently promised her the night before, and I left.

Back at the temporary billets at Camp Henry, I showered, shaved, and changed into clean clothes. Still, Ernie hadn't arrived. He was probably passed out somewhere in a hooch behind the bar district. I didn't have time to wait for him.

The night before, somewhere in our mad swirl from bar to bar, an idea had come to me. There was something I'd missed back at the murder site. I wasn't sure what it was but I had convinced myself that there had to be something.

Without bothering with breakfast, I strode over to the Camp Henry main gate, and once outside, I waved down a kimchee cab.

Three miles outside of Taegu, I told the driver to slow down. A few homes lined the right side of the road. Behind them were steeply sloping hills, spattered on



the lower elevations with a few clumps of pear trees. On the other side of the road stretched many acres of rice and bean fields. Already, men wearing straw hats and with their pants rolled up to their knees were out there working, even in this foreboding overcast.

I saw the home of Mrs. Yi Won-suk and told the driver to slow down. We cruised past. I studied the home. Quiet. Next door, smoke rose from the narrow chimney of the old woman who had been the first to arrive on the murder scene.

I thought about what it would be like for an American in this area.

If he took a cab like I was doing now, he could cruise past the homes along the street and not be observed. Lieutenant Rhee and the Korean National Police had interviewed every cab driver in Taegu—Korean cabbies are used to providing information to the police—but no one had come forward and admitted to hauling a foreigner to this area on the afternoon of the murder. It was possible that someone was lying or had forgotten, but I doubted it. Koreans in general were upset about this case and wanted to solve it. That would include cab drivers.

The other possibility was that the foreigner had come here on foot. Or on bicycle. But either way he would've been noticed. Foreigners stay near the compound or in downtown Taegu. They have no reason to come out

here to this agrarian suburb. And the road leading from town is lined with car washes, auto repair shops, noodle restaurants, and any number of curious proprietors who would've noticed a big-nosed foreigner walking or peddling by. The K.N.P.'s had interviewed them all and come up with nothing.

So how did a foreigner arrive in this neighborhood unobserved? And how had he managed to case the home which held Mrs. Yi Won-suk and her daughter? How had he known that she was alone? Surmise? Maybe. He would've guessed that her husband would be at work in the fields. Maybe taking that chance was part of the thrill.

That still didn't tell me how he'd arrived here unobserved.

And then it hit me. The obvious: by P.O.V.

P.O.V. One of those cherished military acronyms. This one means Privately Owned Vehicle. Not a military vehicle. Most G.I.'s aren't allowed to own a P.O.V. You have to leave your car in the States when you're transferred to Korea. But some high-ranking NCOs or officers, mostly in Seoul, are authorized to have P.O.V.'s. So are civilians.

But the whereabouts of the NCOs and officers and civilians at Camp Henry had already been accounted for. Of course there could be holes in those alibis. Someone might be lying or someone might be covering up for a buddy. To expose that would take more digging. A lot more digging.

By now we'd traveled about a half mile beyond Mrs. Yi's home. The cab driver asked me where I wanted to go. I told him to turn around and drive slowly back toward town.

Were there possible suspects other than the foreigners stationed at Camp Henry? Could someone have been driving out here in a P.O.V. and just by chance have spotted the attractive Mrs. Yi entering her home? After all, this road leads from Taegu up north to Taejon, the home of another U.S. military base, Camp Ames.

But how would that work? Okay, so the guy's cruising along, he spots Mrs. Yi, maybe he slows down to follow her. He even turns around, and then he spots her entering her home, pushing her cart through the gate with her daughter Myong-sŏng inside. Nobody opening the gate for her. Nobody greeting her.

She's home alone.

But then what does he do? If he parks the car along this road he'd have been spotted. Somebody would've remembered him. Foreigners are a rarity in this area. Who knows? Somebody might've even gone outside and waited for him by his car so they could practice their conversational English. Koreans do that all the time. It's considered a friendly gesture. But nothing like that had happened. Lieutenant Rhee and his men had checked. Everyone along this road from here to Taegu had been interviewed.

They'd seen nothing.

So what had the guy done?

I told the cabbie to stop. Up above Mrs. Yi's home loomed a hill covered with shrubs and tufts of long grass. I pointed and asked the cabbie if there was a way up there.

We'd have to follow the road we were on back into town, he told me, and then another road that led back to the top of that hill.

"Is it a seldom-used road?" I asked him. "One that's hard to find?"

He shrugged. "Anyone who drives around here knows about it."

I told him to show me.

Ten minutes later the cab pulled into an open area atop a hill. The space was used, he said, for parking on weekends when filial descendants paid homage to their dearly departed.

I paid him and climbed out of the taxi. More gently rolling hills spread behind me and away from the city of Taegu. Each was dotted with tombstones and small mounds. A graveyard. Koreans bury their dead sitting upright, so they can maintain a view of the world around them. On weekends families come up here with picnic lunches, sit on the mounds, eat, talk, laugh, and try to make the dead person beneath their feet maybe feel that the family hasn't forgotten them.

The cabbie asked me if I wanted him to wait. I told him no thanks. As he sped off I glanced down the hill in the direction of the city. Below spread a perfect



view of the road we had been on and the home of Mrs. Yi Won-suk.

First I examined the parking lot. Nothing. Then I walked down the hill. It was an easy walk because a pathway had been cut by ten thousand footsteps. Soon I was behind the other homes in the area and no curious eyes peeked out to spy on me. A minute later, I stood in front of the open gate of the home of Mrs. Yi Won-suk.

That's how it must've happened. He'd cruised by on the main road, seen Mrs. Yi entering the gate that led to her courtyard, driven up to park atop the hill, and then walked down here.

But who had that time during the middle of a workday? And who had a vehicle dispatched for his personal use? Not any G.I. at Camp Henry. The murderer had to be someone who owned a P.O.V. Maybe he wasn't from Camp Henry at all. Maybe he'd been traveling. An inspection team from 8th Army? Not likely. They usually travel in groups.

Someone with his own P.O.V., traveling the backroads of Korea. A happy wanderer.

That's when it hit me. A salesman. Insurance. That was it. They wandered from one military installation to another selling their wares. Like camp followers.

I walked back to the road in a state of excitement, dying to tell Ernie what I'd come up with. I had to wait ten minutes until another cab cruised by.

You'd think that an unmarried

G.I. with one hundred percent health insurance and free dental and a hundred thousand dollars' worth of cheap Servicemen's Group Life wouldn't need another insurance policy. And they probably don't. But life insurance salesmen somehow managed, every day, to convince them that they do. It's a legitimate product. In fact, before an insurance salesman is allowed access to one of 8th Army's compounds, he and his company have to be vetted by the Judge Advocate General's Office. Any policy they sell to a G.I. must contain a clause that his life insurance is still valid if he's unexpectedly shipped out to a combat zone. Most of the big companies have no problem with this. G.I.'s are young and healthy and the odds are that not many of them are going to die soon.

So it's a profitable market.

Once Ernie and I returned to Seoul, I checked with JAG and was surprised to discover that there were over thirty certified life insurance agents operating amongst the fifty U.S. military compounds in the Republic of Korea. Every one of them owned a P.O.V.

Once we had a list, it was a matter of straight police work eliminating those with alibis. We didn't approach them directly but rather pretended to be potential customers and asked for the agents who served the Taegu area. Most of them didn't. Seoul and the area north to the Demilitarized Zone are where most young G.I.'s can be found. Down

south there is relatively slim pickings. None of the agents actually kept a home base there. But we found of the seven U.S. insurance companies operating in-country, six of them had agents who traveled to Taegu periodically. We were able to establish that four of the agents had been in Seoul at the time of the murder of Mrs. Yi Won-suk. The other two had been traveling in the southern area of the country, covering the bases in Taejon, Waegwan, Taegu, and Pusan. Of those two, one insurance agent was a black man. The other was a Caucasian male with light brown hair and blood type O positive.

We had our man.

The bust was made with the assistance of the Korean National Police. Lieutenant Rhee from Taegu traveled all the way up here to Seoul for the honor of arresting the man who had caused such an uproar in the Korean media.

His name was Fred Ammerman. He lived in the outskirts of Seoul in a cement-block apartment complex in Bampo, just south of the Han River. His wife, a Korean national, was absolutely flabbergasted by the proceedings, but she knew enough not to interfere with the Korean National Police. Ammerman was a man of average height and average weight, except for the potbelly that protruded over the waistline of his tailored slacks. He remained calm while the Korean police handcuffed him and while

Lieutenant Rhee told him in broken English that they were taking him in for questioning.

Ammerman did glance at us hopefully and say, "What about 8th Army?"

"We have no jurisdiction over you, Ammerman," Ernie told him. "This is between you and the ROKs."

As a civilian in-country on a work visa, military law couldn't touch him.

After the K.N.P.'s took Ammerman away, I spoke to his wife for a few moments. She was a husky woman, taller and stronger than Mrs. Yi Won-suk had been, but with attractive facial features that softened the pronounced bone structure beneath the flesh. She stared into the distance as she spoke.

"My children are both at school," she said. "For that I am happy."

"Did you know what he was doing on those trips?" I asked her.

"I knew he had women. That I know long time. But take woman like that. Punch her. Kill her. That I don't know."

But there seemed little doubt in Mrs. Ammerman's mind that the charges were true.

Already a crowd of neighbors was beginning to gather outside on the sidewalk. Mrs. Ammerman glanced toward them and then, with a worried look, started clawing at her lower lip. After they'd arrested her foreign husband, the Korean cops had shown no concern about Mrs. Ammerman at all. They weren't concerned about



questioning her because a wife is not expected to offer any evidence that might hurt her husband. And they certainly weren't concerned about her mental state. By now, Ernie was outside, leaning against his jeep, waiting for me, chewing gum.

"Is there anyone I can call?" I asked. "A friend or relative that can be with you?"

She glanced at me as if awakening from a dream. "Don't worry. Pretty soon they come. Everybody come. I no can stop them."

I left her and walked out to the jeep.

Once Ammerman was in custody, the evidence against him piled up pretty fast. They tested his blood just to make sure that the medical records Ernie and I had checked earlier were correct. He was in fact O positive. And they matched his body hair by microscopic analysis with the pubic hairs found at the murder site of Mrs. Yi Won-suk. A perfect match. Also, Ammerman had no convincing alibi for his whereabouts on the day of the murder, but he took a hard line and chose not to speak to the Korean National Police. This was tough to do since they have their ways of convincing you that it would be in your interest to answer their questions. But Ammerman gutted it out and kept mum.

His insurance company dropped him like a bad habit. But Ammerman did have savings and the word we received from the K.N.P.'s was that Ammerman was hiring

some American lawyer from Honolulu who'd worked on foreign cases before. Not smart. The Koreans considered this move to be an insult to Korean lawyers and the Korean judicial system in general. The better move would've been to plead guilty and express great remorse and ask the court for leniency.

In fact, the Korean government would've been glad to give it. After a few months, a few years at most, in a Korean jail, they would've shuffled him quietly out of the country. A face-saving gesture to assuage Korean public opinion. But if Ammerman fought them, they'd have to fight back to save face for the Korean judicial system and Korean pride and then they'd have to lay a sentence on him more commensurate with the enormity of his crime. Which was murder, after all, of an innocent woman. The Korean government didn't want to do this. They didn't want any publicity in the American press that would be adverse toward Korea and that might, in the long run, drive a wedge between the United States and Korea and jeopardize the long-standing security arrangements that held those seven hundred thousand Communist North Korean soldiers across the DMZ at bay. And even more importantly, the Korean government didn't dare damage the steady stream of American dollars that flowed from the U.S. Treasury to the Korean government in the form of both economic and military assistance.



But not realizing this, Ammerman was taking a tough stance. He was refusing to cooperate with the Korean National Police, refusing to admit his guilt, and just in general pissing everybody off.

All of this would've been his problem if it hadn't been for the woman who appeared in the provost marshal's office two days before the scheduled start date of Ammerman's trial.

The woman was his wife, Mrs. Mi-hwa Ammerman.

Colonel Harkins, the current provost marshal of the 8th United States Army, didn't want to talk to her. However, he could recognize potential trouble when he saw it, so he let her into his office. Her English wasn't the greatest so I was called in for two reasons: I could speak enough Korean to translate and I was familiar with the case.

When I sat down, Mrs. Ammerman started in on me in rapid-fire Korean. I interrupted her and slowed her down several times and as best I could, I translated for the colonel. The gist of her complaint was, the Korean National Police wouldn't allow her to talk to her husband.

Did her husband want to talk to her?

No. He had flatly refused and the K.N.P.'s wouldn't force him.

What she hoped to do was to convince her husband to plead guilty. Since the case had hit the newspapers and the television, everyone in the country had turned against her. That wasn't so bad,

for herself she didn't care. But her children had been teased unmercifully at school and her oldest son, age twelve, had actually been beaten by a pack of older boys. So much disruption had been caused that the authorities at Seoul International School had asked Mrs. Ammerman to withdraw her children from their student body. With no money coming in, she would have to send her children to the Korean public schools. That would be a disaster. Not only were they half American, which was usually enough reason for harassment, but their father was a rapist and a murderer.

"I can't get a visa to go to the States," Mrs. Ammerman told me. "I am a Korean citizen, so are my children. My husband never had any interest in applying for U.S. citizenship for us."

She leaned toward Colonel Harkins, still speaking Korean to him, with me translating.

"Even my older brother has had trouble. Everyone shunning him because of me. And now he's been fired from his job. No Korean company wants anyone whose sister was foolish enough to marry an American. Especially an American killer."

Then she started to cry.

I finished explaining everything she said to Colonel Harkins. He spread his hands and asked, "What does she want us to do?"

"What I want you to do," she said, "is force the Korean police to let me talk to my husband. I will convince him to plead guilty. Then my children's normal lives will be



returned to them. We will have our face back. People will respect their father for at least having repented of his crimes. We will be pitied but we will be tolerated. And my brother, he will have a chance to beg for forgiveness for having such a foolish sister and he will have a chance to get his job back."

What she said made sense. In Korean society, once you plead guilty and ask for forgiveness, no matter how heinous your crime, you will usually receive at least some measure of leniency. When the criminal offers atonement, all is well again under Heaven and the King is secure on his throne. At that point, not to grant the request for forgiveness would mean that the person turning down the request is not a person of true Confucian virtue. As the Koreans would say, he wouldn't be showing a big heart.

Eighth Army would also be pleased if Ammerman pleaded guilty. Although he wasn't a soldier, we had sponsored his insurance company and his work visa, and his crime tainted the reputation of every American in Korea. A long, drawn-out criminal trial wouldn't help anyone.

The provost marshal was new in-country and the intricate dance of Korean justice he still found baffling. But he did know from every conversation he had over drinks at the Officers' Club that 8th Army wanted this prosecution iced. He turned to me. "What can we do, Sueño?"

I thought about it. "I'll talk to

the K.N.P. liaison officer. If you throw your weight behind it, we should be able to force our way in to talk to Ammerman."

The provost marshal nodded his consent.

Mrs. Mi-hwa Ammerman rose from her chair, her leather handbag clasped tightly in front of her black skirt. Then she bowed gracefully at the waist.

Colonel Harkins didn't know quite what to do so he just cleared his throat and nodded.

With ramparts of hewn rock and a roof of upturned tile shingles, Suwon Prison looks medieval because it is in fact medieval. Built during the Yi Dynasty, it had later been used by the Japanese Imperial Army when they colonized Korea prior to World War II. After the surrender of Japan, the United States provisional government took over, and now the Republic of Korea runs the place with all the efficiency that a military-dominated government can bring to bear.

A uniformed guard led Mi-hwa Ammerman and me down cold stone steps. At the bottom of three flights, a light was switched on, and down a long corridor another guard waited in front of a thick wooden door. Our footsteps clattered on wet brick.

In front of the door, Mrs. Ammerman tiptoed to peek through the grated opening. I peered in from behind her. The guard clicked another switch and the cell was suffused with light.



Fred Ammerman stood a few feet from us, his beard long, his blue eyes bloodshot and wild.

"What do you want?"

His voice rasped like the hinges on ancient doors.

At first his wife just cried. The guards and I stepped back down the hallway to allow them some privacy. A few minutes went by. They whispered to one another through the rusted bars. I could make out some of what they were saying, but I tried to block it out. I didn't want to eavesdrop. All this was their personal business. Not mine. As a law enforcement officer, I wasn't officially involved. The result we wanted, the conviction of Fred Ammerman for rape and murder, was a foregone conclusion. No Korean judge would dare set him free.

A voice was raised. Fred Ammerman's, not his wife's. While he shouted, she stepped back against the stone wall. He kept up the tirade. Soon she knelt down, cowering, and made herself small. One of the guards had heard enough. He marched down the passageway and gruffly told Mrs. Ammerman that it was time to go.

As I walked her up the steps, her husband continued shouting.

"No way am I going to plead guilty," he said. And then he added a few epithets that, in my opinion, Mi-hwa Ammerman didn't deserve.

On the day of Fred Ammerman's trial for the rape and murder of Yi Won-suk, both Ernie and

I wore our Class A green uniforms. We sat on polished wooden benches in the Hall of the Ministry of Justice in the heart of downtown Taegu. Mrs. Ammerman sat quietly in the first row directly behind her husband. Neither of her children was present.

The American lawyer Ammerman had hired was named Aaron Murakami. He was from Hawaii and whenever he spoke, a Korean translator hired for the occasion would interpret whatever he said.

How could Ammerman be so dumb? I had no reason to think that Murakami wasn't a good attorney, but he was Japanese-American. The Koreans are still chafing over what the Japanese Imperial Army had done to them during the thirty years leading up to the end of World War II. A foreign lawyer was bad enough, but a Japanese lawyer would cause the Koreans to dig in their heels. If Ammerman was toast before, he was burnt ashes now. Even Ernie realized the mistake. When Murakami walked into the hall, Ernie smiled smugly and crossed his arms.

"It's over already," he said.

In a Korean courtroom there's no jury. Only a grim-faced judge who, in this case, stared down at us mere mortals through thick-lensed bifocals.

The judge droned on in Korean, something about the initial plea, but I could follow little of what he was saying. My facility with the Korean language started with the free classes that the Army offers on base, but after that most of it

was picked up in barrooms during conversations with beautiful ladies. The legalese the judge spouted was beyond me.

Ernie and I didn't expect to be called to the stand until the trial was well underway. That would probably be late morning or mid-afternoon. Koreans don't believe in long, drawn-out proceedings. It's up to the police to capture the guilty party. After that, to spend a lot of time and effort and taxpayers' money just to find that same person innocent would be a great loss of face. Not only for the police but also for the entire Korean judicial system.

Ammerman would be tried—and almost certainly convicted—today.

Suddenly, I realized that the judge was speaking English. Even Ernie perked up. The language was halting, as if the judge didn't have too many chances to practice his conversational skills, but the syntax was precise. Not the bargirl talk I was used to.

Fred Ammerman, whose head had been hanging down, sat up and listened. So did his attorney.

"I want to be sure," the judge said, "that you fully understand what is being offered. You have a chance, before we go to trial, to plead guilty."

I understood the choice Ammerman had to make, even if he didn't. The Koreans don't plea bargain. You either plead guilty and have a chance of being shown mercy, or you plead innocent and face the full wrath of the law. The judge continued to talk, glancing

sometimes at Aaron Murakami, sometimes at Fred Ammerman. He continued until he was sure that both men understood the gravity of the decision they were about to make.

When the judge finished, Murakami and Ammerman huddled and whispered fervently to one another.

Mi-hwa Ammerman, sitting in back of her husband, had previously kept her face lowered. Now she looked up hopefully, as if she wanted to climb over the railing and insert herself between her husband and his attorney.

Fred Ammerman kept shaking his head.

His wife stared at him in despair. Her hand lifted from her mouth as if she wanted to reach out to him. Only by a plea of guilty would Fred Ammerman's family be allowed to reenter Korean society—not completely free of stigma but at least free of having to bear the burden of shame of being related to a killer and, even worse, of being related to an unrepentant killer. One who has not only defiled society but then proceeded to spit in society's eye.

Neither Fred Ammerman nor his attorney paid any attention to Mi-hwa. Aaron Murakami seemed to ask his client one final question. Vehemently, Ammerman shook his head. No.

Like a collapsing doll, Mi-hwa Ammerman sank back into her seat. I expected her to start crying again. Instead she stuffed her damp handkerchief into her

handbag and left open the metal clasp.

Aaron Murakami rose to his feet. "Your Honor," he said in English, "my client has decided to plead not guilty."

A murmur of disapproval ran through the crowd. Dutifully, the translator repeated what Murakami had said but by then no one was listening.

Mi-hwa's face seemed to have set in stone. She sat perfectly still, staring straight ahead, her small hand dangling inside her large leather handbag.

I elbowed Ernie. "She's taking it hard."

Ernie glanced over at Mi-hwa Ammerman. "Yeah," Ernie said, "but the woman Ammerman raped took it even harder."

Mi-hwa's face had drained of color.

The prosecutor, a dapper Korean man in a pin-striped suit, rose to his feet. He cleared his throat and started to drone on in that type of Korean language again that was indecipherable to me.

Since he'd been brought into the room, not once had Ammerman acknowledged the presence of his wife or even so much as glanced in her direction. Instead, he glared at the tiny prosecutor, as if he wanted to leap across the room and throttle his neck as he'd throttled the neck of Mrs. Yi Won-suk.

Ernie yawned and tried to make himself more comfortable on the wooden bench. We had already discussed which nightclubs we'd be hitting tonight. Before

leaving Seoul, we'd changed a small pile of military payment certificates into won, the Korean currency. The money would be put to its usual good use: cold beer, women, and wild times, not necessarily in that order.

While I was pondering these soothing thoughts, a glint of metal flashed from the seating area behind Fred Ammerman. Without thinking, I rose to my feet..

That's when I saw her, Mi-hwa Ammerman, her face streaming with tears, standing now, her handbag dropped to the floor.

Without conscious thought, I started moving toward her. A long butcher knife appeared in her slender hand. She raised it. She stepped forward.

A shout bellowed through the hall.

I shoved people out of the way and stepped over benches, trying to reach her, knowing all the while that there wasn't time.

Fred Ammerman never turned fully around.

His attorney noticed that something was amiss and as he swiveled he instinctively held up his hands. A yell erupted from his belly but it was too late. Ammerman's bearded face was turning toward Mi-hwa as she leaned over the railing, raised the glistening blade, and brought it down full force into her husband's back.

Fred Ammerman let out a grunt of surprise. I kept moving forward and was only a few feet from him now. Mi-hwa held onto the hilt of the blade, shoving it deeper into heaving flesh. Gore



spurted from Fred Ammerman's back like the unraveling of a scarlet ribbon.

The confusion in Ammerman's eyes turned to dull knowledge. Then, a split second later, that knowledge turned to pain.

Aaron Murakami reached for Mi-hwa. I leapt forward and elbowed him out of the way. Uniformed police were now surging toward us. I folded myself over Mi-hwa, enveloping her in my arms. She let go of the butcher knife and leaned backwards, allowing me to pull her away from the railing and protect her there, while other men hurtled toward us. Bodies thudded into us but I held on, not letting them have her.

She kept her eyes riveted on the back of her husband, as if mesmerized by the damage she had wrought.

Ernie grabbed hold of Ammerman. One of the Korean cops jerked the butcher knife out of the blood-soaked back. That's when Ammerman stood upright, supported by Ernie and Murakami, and then, as if someone had sucker punched him in the gut, he folded forward. Bright red blood spurted like a water spout from his mouth.

Mi-hwa Ammerman didn't cry, she didn't struggle, she just let me hold her and she kept staring at her husband, as if she were amazed at what she'd just done.

And then someone jostled us and more men surrounded me, and despite my best efforts, Mi-hwa Ammerman was dragged from my arms. I followed her out of the main hall and down the corridor, but then she disappeared into the screaming, moving crowd. I returned to the courtroom.

Ernie grabbed me by the shoulders and stared into my face.

"You still with me?" he asked.

I nodded.

He slapped me lightly on the cheek, making sure I was all right. Then he said, "That's one chick who knows how to save face."

On the floor, the thing that was once Fred Ammerman shuddered. Then his body convulsed and a whoosh of air exited his mouth, like a great bellows emptying itself in one final rush. The hot breath rose to the top of the stone rafters far above our heads, lingered for a while, and then was gone.

FICTION

James Lincoln Warren



MICHING MALICHO

Illustration by Linda Weatherly

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 3/03

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Ophe. What means this, my Lord?

Ham. Marry this is Miching *Malicho*, that meanes Mischeefe.

—*Wm. Shakespeare, Hamlet, III. 2.*

A burble of female laughter drifted up the stairs, underscored by a pleasant rumble of baritone, the words unintelligible through the door. Puckett laid the quill down on the blotter and stared at the wavering flame of his candle. Soon the downstairs entrance door would clap shut, and the stairs would creak with Cecilia's steps, and her dress would rustle against the wall and banister as she climbed.

If her spark had given her brandy, she would berate and mock him as soon as she entered. But if she had played well tonight, if she had gotten more than a single curtain call, if her mad-scene had wrung every tear from the audience—then she would be quiet, solicitous, perhaps even tender.

The door to their chambers scraped against its frame as she pushed it open. Gathering her skirts in her arms to negotiate the narrow opening, she squeezed inside. Puckett turned from his desk to regard her.

She was not as winsome as when she appeared on stage, powdered and rouged to perfection, her fine head crowned with a tall wig bedecked with beads and glass jewellery reflecting the amber lights. Her movements now did not have the same studied grace. An objective observer might recognise that the once-celebrated softness of her beauty had lately been hardened by tribulation, but the swanlike neck, the marble-smooth arms, the soft rosebud texture of her lips—Puckett closed his eyes as the words to describe her began swimming in his brain—all these things were the very atoms of pleasure.

She crossed to the tiny chest of drawers that served as her dressing table. Pausing as she removed an earring—a gift from an enraptured young viscount lately sent down from Oxford—she stared at her husband appraisingly.

"Are they good?" she asked, her voice flat.

Puckett opened his eyes. "To what do you refer, Dark Lady?"

She frowned almost imperceptibly at the pet name. "Why, to your new verses, to which you have been in thrall this fortnight past. So besotted with words have you been, Rupert, that you have scarce detected that I live. And so I ask, are they good?"

"If I scribble verse, it is because that you, and you only, do inspire me. Were it not for you, Dark Lady, I would be mute as a mackerel."

"Poetic inspiration gets no credit from the butcher or baker, Rupert," she said irritably. "And so yet again, are your verses good?"

“They are good,” he said quietly. “They are the best I have ever writ, the words themselves echoing with thunder, but they are not to the effeminate modern taste. We inhabit a time when printers do nothing more than pander to the coarse appetites of the canaille.” He frowned and added bitterly, “You of all people should know that.”

She relaxed and smiled sadly, and removed the other earring. “Am I truly your muse, Rupert?”

“Thou art my Melpomene, my Thalia,” he said tenderly, “my very Erato, and my Calliope. There is no poetry in my soul but that it sings in thy voice. You are the hearth of the flame of genius, beyond which I can have no want.”

“Do you never feel inspired toward the merely practical, Rupert?” she asked. “I am yours now, but how might I remain so in such indigency as we endure?”

Anger swelled up within him and erupted in words. “Are you so taken with mere wealth?”

This was not a novel topic between them. When she did not answer, he continued: “Or is it the fawning of some betitled bratchet, scarce weaned from his mother’s pap, that occasions this appreciation for luxury?”

“Do not accuse *me* of indiscretion, sirrah, not when we find ourselves in such straits because of your own witless tongue.”

“I am no hypocrite to heap adulation on a stenchful midden, no matter how sweet-scented its name.”

“Nor a man of tact, neither, to make such a man your enemy. But even powerful enemies may be made to suffer, Rupert. I have heard it from Lord Fenleigh tonight that Mr. Sheridan has invited him to invest in his acquisition of the Drury Lane Theatre, and that Mr. Garrick has consented to sell his interest, should Sheridan meet the price.”

Puckett stiffened. His eyes gleamed yellow in the smoking tallow candlelight. As Cecilia removed her necklace, she watched him in the mirror. It was to be preferred to looking at herself, no matter how angry he was. She knew that her loveliness, once the toast of England, was fading—she knew she could no longer expect the largesse she had attracted when her appearance was without flaw. To be old and ugly and poor—she clenched her eyes shut. When she opened them, her husband had picked up his penknife and was brutally trimming a goose quill, his mouth tight.

“Do you remember the romance you wrote for me when first we met?” she asked soothingly. “The Spanish Play, I mean.”

“What of it?” he grumbled.

“Tonight amongst the players, there was some discussion as to whether Sheridan might offer a Shakespeare to inaugurate his pro-



prietorship, or whether a new modern author might not be preferred. The general opinion was that Shakespeare should draw more, but that Sheridan, being mad for novelty, will choose a new play. Whereupon someone—I don't remember who it was—quipped, 'Well, Heaven defend us from these ancient Plays, These Mortal Bards of Good Queen Bess's Days!'

Puckett snorted in derision. "Sheridan would be mad to provide some low new entertainment. There has never been Shakespeare's equal. Sheridan is but a yahoo—"

"Rupert, did you not recognise the couplet? It is from *Double Falsehood*. Think upon what that means."

"How does that bear upon aught?"

"Oh my darling, Sheridan *yearns* for a startling new entertainment, but he knows full well that he *needs* something as certain as the Bard of Avon. 'Tis a pity that our Will cannot deliver a new play to him, is it not?"

As the implication of her words finally struck him, his eyes widened, and then as suddenly narrowed and darted into the corners of the room, as if he were seeing his ideas coalesce from shadow-stuff.

"*Double Falsehood*," he said, and he allowed himself a short laugh. From where she sat, Cecilia could almost feel his pulse racing. He continued rapidly: "*Double Falsehood*. How apt a title. But there is much to be considered—falsehood aplenty indeed—the chirography to start, and the connection of the manuscript to Lewis Theobald—no, not direct to Theobald, but through Stede, much subtler—these might even be accomplished—and might not Sheridan's vainglory do the rest?"

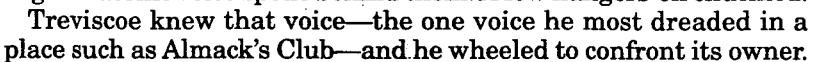
His right hand covered his mouth as he continued to think out loud. "But such actions are bold, and fraught with danger—"

He stared at her, and she saw the flame of ambition relighted in him. She had at last succeeded in rekindling his hunger for success, but instead of exultation, she felt a sudden if slight pang, and why this should be, she did not fathom.

"Shall such a chance come ever again?" she asked, allowing the most subtle plaintive note into her voice. Her voice turned brittle. "We know too well it cannot, my darling, not before we descend penniless and despised into dotage."

She suppressed a shiver and regained the cooing alto register that had endeared her to so many gentlemen in the audience. "Such actions are bold, aye, and dangerous, but this is the time for boldness, Rupert. Be bold, then, and leave the rest to me."

He nodded in assent. She caught his eye, and urgently whispered, "And let no living man stand between us and our ascendancy, sir."



The man behind it was a macaroni of the most brilliant stripe, clad in violet satin, wearing a yellow curl-wig that could have hidden a thundercloud, his smug face patched with a crescent moon, a circle, and a star. Treviscoe always felt as low as a country groom in his presence, and it didn't help that he was under-dressed.

"Mr. Hixon," he said icily, making his leg. "As I recall, sir, Tobit had no dog—'twas Tobit's son Tobias who had the dog. As this truth is so plainly written in the Scripture, I must be amazed that you have failed to sniff out the dog's true Toby."

Raucous laughter erupted around them. Aside from being the diminutive of both Tobit and Tobias, "Toby" was a low word for buttocks.

"*Que bon badinage*, Mr. Treviscoe," replied Frederick Hixon, clenching his teeth but smiling nonetheless. "Shall, however, leave the sniffing out to you, m'dear. As to any hope you may entertain of receiving a commission from Mr. Sheridan, regret to say that your famous nose is on a spent scent. I have once again anticipated you in solving the riddle."

"Ah, Alan! There you are," said Richard Brinsley Sheridan, approaching them. "I wondered what occasioned such mirth, and I could only surmise it was some brilliant repartee on your part." Sheridan was a few years younger than Treviscoe, but care was already beginning to show on his handsome face. He had attached himself to particularly indulgent company since Treviscoe had met the young firebrand a few years previously. "I believe you are already acquainted with my good friend Fred. I have it that he is a competitor of yours, of sorts."

"A competitor of sorts, perhaps he is, sir, but certainly no *rival*," replied Treviscoe, referring obliquely to Sheridan's enormously popular play, *The Rivals*. Its success had lifted Sheridan to the apex of society.

"Lud, no," said Hixon. "Barely give him a thought, don't I? 'Tis well known, I cannot tolerate a rival, what?"

"I believe that few others can tolerate your arrival as well," said Treviscoe.

Hixon eschewed further attempts at wit. "I have informed Mr. Treviscoe that I had already got the truth concerning your mystery, Richard, and that his services will not be required therefore."

"My humble thanks, Fred," said Sheridan, taking Treviscoe's elbow and steering him away. "But I would hate it that Mr. Treviscoe should not at least join with me in a bumper of claret and rejoice in my good fortune. Will you, too, join us?"

"Most kind of you, Richard, but must sadly decline, what? Affairs of state call me away," said Hixon, reminding those present that he was a member of Parliament. As he straightened from his farewell



bow, he looked directly into Magnus Gunn's fierce eyes.

"Gunn."

"Hixon."

They bowed to each other so shallowly it were better described as bobbing. Hixon turned and fairly fled.

"Sheridan, have you met my particular friend, Captain Gunn?" asked Treviscoe. "He is lately returned from America."

Sheridan gave Gunn a challenging look. Along with his crowd, Sheridan was a vocal supporter of the insurrectionists. But his geniality and good manners prevailed, and he shook Gunn's hand.

"Sit down, Treviscoe. Wine, Captain?"

"What was yon fopling babbling about?" asked Gunn, jerking his thumb at Hixon's retreating back. "I tell ye, Mr. Sheridan, Hixon's no' a match for Alan in the sphere of indagations."

"I must reluctantly agree with you, Captain, although, appearances to the contrary, Fred is not completely devoid of intelligence, and is therefore a man with his applications," replied Sheridan. "He has, in fact, produced much of interest during his enquiries on my behalf, but he has not therewith separated me from my need for Alan Treviscoe's talents."

He looked with sudden concentration at Treviscoe. "I have been made a most extraordinary offer, one which should surely guarantee an unforgettable inauguration to my management at Drury Lane, but it is an offer that I fear may be fraudulent; to wit, I have been offered a manuscript, exscribed in a secretary hand, purporting to be *Cardenio*."

Treviscoe waited expectantly to hear more. Sheridan looked at him with equal curiosity. Finally, Treviscoe hazarded, "*Cardenio*? I know the name from Cervantes, I believe, in the first part of *Don Quixote*."

Sheridan laughed. "Aye, that is so, but the *Cardenio* to which I refer is, in fact, a comic play, written by none other than William Shakespeare, that was lost."

"An unknown Shakespeare. Devilish good luck—that is, if it is genuine."

"Precisely," said Sheridan meaningfully. "I mean that you should determine for me whether it is so."

Treviscoe shook his head. "Richard, I have found out fraudulent shipping contracts and insurance policies, but I have never attempted to discover a forgery in literature. As you know, my literary taste runs to the classics. I suspect that you are far better qualified than I in adjudging whether such a play might be genuine."

"As Samuel Johnson has with James MacPherson's fraudulent Ossian?"



"Ossian's no fraud," objected Gunn. He intoned stentoriously:

'S lionmhar ceamna na marbh by treun

Air osna, dubh-aisra' na bein,

Nuair ghluisas a ghellach, an ear,

Mar ghlascia, du shiubhal nan speur.

"Which is to say in English, 'Green thorn of the hill of ghosts, that shakest thy head to nightly winds! I hear no sound in thee; is there no spirit's windy skirt now rustling in thy leaves? Often are the steps of the dead, in the dark-eddying blasts; when the moon, a dun shield, from the east, is rolled along the sky.'

"'Tis the same tale of Tamora my grandmother recited to me when I was but a wee bairn."

Treviscoe and Sheridan looked at him in surprise.

"Leaving aside whether Ossian is genuine or no," Sheridan continued tactfully, "you are right in assuming that I should not find a mere imitation of Shakespeare to be difficult to detect. *Cacatum non est pictum*, after all."

Gunn looked blankly at Sheridan.

"Captain Gunn has no Latin," explained Treviscoe.

"As I have no Erse," Sheridan said, "but as you were kind enough to translate Ossian, Captain, I should return the favour. The Roman apothegm just spoken might be rendered into the vulgar—be so kind as to excuse the petty double entendre—as, 'a shitten canvas doth not a picture make.'"

Gunn laughed.

"I have never heard it suggested of Shakespeare, unlike Ossian, that he was not the author of his plays—what an amazing idea: can you imagine someday that some pillock might claim Marlowe or Bacon was their true author?—but of this play I must admit to considerable distrust concerning its origin," Sheridan continued. "Yet I have read a transcription of the play, and while it is certainly not of the same calibre as his great works, yet it might favourably be compared with his lesser efforts. Thus quality is not an unambiguous test. Rather, I am concerned of the play's history, and worse, of the curse that seems to attend it."

"A curse?" Treviscoe's eyes assumed a languid expression and he leaned back in his chair.

"I see I have lost your interest, Alan," said Sheridan ruefully.

"I know yon look," said Gunn, "and not to worry, Mr. Sheridan, for it means ye have at last *captured* his interest."

"Tell me about the curse," Treviscoe said.

"'Tis probably naught but the most mean superstition—"

Treviscoe waited out Sheridan's embarrassment.

"—but what if, in the absence of a curse, there was in its place, the curse's mimic?"



"Do you mean that you suspect that someone wants you to fear such a curse, and so its supposed results are realised through human machination, posed as supernatural?"

"That is precisely what I mean," said Sheridan. "If such were true, then I must admit it might be dangerous, for it could have no lesser aim than my specific incommodation, and peradventure a more sinister purpose."

"How is this curse expressed?"

"I am confident that you are aware that the theatrical world is rife with superstition—*exempli gratia*, Shakespeare's tragedy of the Thane of Cawdor invariably being referred to as the Scottish Play in lieu of its proper title, for it is an unlucky play; or the perceived dangers attendant to playing Hamlet's ghost, a part too near the sepulchre for comfort. In the playhouse, for luck's sake, the players go so far as to soundly curse each other ere the curtain is raised—conjuring that each other's legs be broken; and similar sentiments—in order that the spirits of misfortune, observing such malice, might be misdirected, and instead make their visitations on those unguarded who have received a benedictory, but not therefore benefactory, wish.

"Now it has been suggested that *Cardenio* might be such an unlucky play as those others. Did not the Bard lose his life after it was finished? He ne'er wrote another. Was not Lewis Theobald thoroughly, if not justly, ruined by Alexander Pope's malice, and why did he not stage the play as Shakespeare had written it, if he were not afraid, and why did he not include it in his edition, if he did not know that the play was cursed?"

"I fear you have lost me, Richard."

"That foreign education of yours has done you little service for knowledge of English letters, Alan."

"*Mea culpa*, Richard. Now who was Theobald? Before you answer, yes, even I in my manifest ignorance know of Alexander Pope."

"Lewis Theobald was the author of *Shakespeare Restored*, a volume that attacked Mr. Pope's emendations to the works of Shakespeare in favour of the original language. Its publication roused Pope's well-renowned choler, and in retaliation, Pope penned a mock epic called *The Dunciad*, casting Theobald as its hero, the son of the goddess Dullness."

"I thought the hero of the *The Dunciad* was meant to be Colley Cibber."

"And so it was, after Theobald's death, when Pope shifted his rancour to Mr. Cibber in Theobald's place. Rather than waste a triumph of good invective, Mr. Pope reconstituted his insult against another target and rewrote the poem accordingly, somewhat like reloading a duelling pistol, or so I always thought of it, albeit with ink in lieu of



lead. A bullet may spill blood, but it takes a pen to drip vitriol.

"In the sequel, Theobald published his own edition of Shakespeare, which was in every important way superior to Mr. Pope's, certainly to be preferred over Warburton's, and so it held the field, until Dr. Johnson took his turn. But curiously, Theobald did not include *Cardenio* among Shakespeare's plays."

"Why is that curious? You said that the play had been lost."

"It is curious because Theobald claimed to possess three copies of *Cardenio* of varying quality. He even staged his own version, emended more heavily, I might observe, than ever Pope emended the Bard, which he entitled *Double Falsehood*, and which was very well received in its day.

"Now when Theobald died, no trace of any of the three copies of *Cardenio* could be found. Wifeless and without legitimate issue (the curse?), he bequeathed his estate to his close friend Mr. Stede of Covent Garden, who, never succeeded, or so he claimed, in finding any of the three copies among the many dozens of plays left him. Mr. Stede died some years past, and from that time to this, *Cardenio* was believed to be irretrievably lost."

"Until by some extraordinary coincidence, it resurfaces just in time for the new and untried manager of Drury Lane to offer his inaugural production," said Treviscoe dryly, "*videlicet*, at the exact moment when his new proprietorship most requires a sensational success."

Sheridan smiled crookedly. "I see you apprehend my natural tendency to incredulity in this matter—'tis no scene from life we regard here, but like unto some scene in a badly written drama. But to continue, the play—I mean the *Cardenio* play itself, not the 'badly written drama' unfolding about me, of which *Cardenio* is the centre-piece—the play made its appearance on the scene in this wise: I was in the midst of my negotiations with Mr. Garrick. Our parleys were held most confidential, involving no one besides himself and me, except for those whose help I needed withal to raise the price Mr. Garrick demanded. In the end, I went partners with my father-in-law, Mr. Linley, and Dr. James Ford, but not before I sounded out several of my acquaintance whom I considered of sufficient substance to support the endeavour. Among these was young Viscount Fenleigh, an intimate of the Prince of Wales and a frequenter of the amusements at Covent Garden. I was mistaken in his substance, as I should have known from his profligacy, and was obliged to withdraw my petition from him in favour of Mr. Linley and Dr. Ford. Fenleigh's nothing but a puppy, really."

"I take it that Mr. Hixon's investigation began with Lord Fenleigh," hazarded Treviscoe. "Whither did it lead him?"

"Fenleigh had a friend, an aged and sober antiquary named Mr.



Morcar Smith, who apparently stumbled upon the manuscript whilst cataloguing the personal library of a person of quality, whose antipathy to public notice has occasioned an insistence on complete anonymity, but whose recent financial encumbrances have required the selling off of certain personal valuables. It was through the agency of Mr. Smith that the manuscript came to Lord Fenleigh's attention—Smith, by the by, has since crossed the bar, parted from this life by a footpad near his lodging in Seven Dials, which, although not an unusual circumstance given the evil reputation of that neighbourhood, still 'tis a sinister coincidence and gives one pause. Fenleigh was able to purchase the manuscript and have it copied, but he showed a part of the original to Fred and me and to a man of Fred's acquaintance, one Mr. Lawne, a solicitor expert in ancient documents, albeit of a legal character, such as wills and contracts and the like. Mr. Lawne unhesitatingly expressed his opinion that the manuscript was a product of the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century. I believe I have mentioned that it was writ in a secretary hand, a style which, Mr. Lawne advised us, has not been used since Shakespeare's time. Also, the ink was brown rather than black, and I have it from the same authority that in early Stuart times, all manner of coloured inks were in general use."

"A clever forger would do no less," Treviscoe pointed out.

"True, but such an opinion as Mr. Lawne's was adequate to justify the continuation of our enquiries," Sheridan said. "Fred was able to trace the manuscript to the aforementioned library and to vouch for the integrity of its owner, although he did not find himself free to compromise that worthy's name."

"I shouldna take Hixon's word on any man's integrity," said Gunn.

Sheridan was amused. "I've never known Fred to lie outright, Captain. He has a politician's instinct for what might be called verbal *chiaroscuro*, placing the subject of his discourse in whatever light he chooses, but he was unequivocal on this point, and I see no reason to disbelieve him at all."

"The owner's reputation and character may be wholly irrelevant to the controversy, as the library was not catalogued by him, but by Mr. Smith," said Treviscoe. "This manuscript could have fallen into Mr. Smith's hands from anywhere, and then included in the library to give it a false provenance. Mr. Smith is no longer available to testify one way or t'other."

"Provenance? Is that a new word?" asked Sheridan.

"Alan frequently uses words no Christian can understand," said Magnus. "I attribute it to his being corrupted by Jesuits in his youth."

"But I do not babble heathen Scotch in public," retorted Treviscoe:



"It is a new word, Richard, from the French, to describe the origin of a document or valuable artifact, a concept of some benefit in assigning the worth of like property when insured."

"Then I believe the play's *provenance*, as you have it, is not necessarily false. Fred was able to ascertain that our unnamed worthy had occasion over the course of many years to relieve Mr. Stede of some mounting debts, through the expedient of purchasing various books left to Mr. Stede by Mr. Theobald. Fred managed to discover a receipt dated 1758, written to the worthy from Mr. Stede, acknowledging the receipt of fifty guineas for the purchase of what is only referred to as 'The Spanish Play'."

"Did Fred question the owner concerning this purchase?" asked Treviscoe. "I shouldn't think much of the evidence as you have so far stated it, unless the owner were able to vouch for 'The Spanish Play' being handwritten in an English secretary hand. Spaniards are unco fond of plays, don't ye know. Cervantes was himself a playwright."

Sheridan's face became grave. "Now there's a difficulty, Alan. Our worthy, being rather advanced in years, is somewhat *non compos mentis*."

"A condition which would greatly ease the task of anyone contemplating the execution of a fraud," replied Treviscoe. "In such equivocal circumstances, how should you believe that 'The Spanish Play' is indeed Shakespeare's *Cardenio*?"

"Mr. Stede was a man of the theatre, Alan, and thus prone to the superstitions of his kind. If the play were cursed, he would be certain never to refer to it by its proper title, nevermore he would directly name *Macbeth*. There, 'tis said at last." Sheridan laughed nervously.

"Methinks the connection a tenuous one, and certainly the evidence is of insufficient weight to draw such a certain conclusion," Treviscoe said, silently thinking that it was precisely the sort of conclusion that Hixon would make in his eagerness to be lauded for his investigative prowess.

"So thought I also, Alan. That is why I turn to you now."

"I shall give the matter thought, Richard. Pray call upon me tomorrow at Lloyd's, and if I choose to accept, we may discuss the terms of our contract. There is but one thing more—where might I find young Fenleigh?"

Sheridan's eyes twinkled. "That should be easy enough, Alan: I should expect to find him of an evening at the Rotunda. If he may arrive early, I can assure you that he will depart late."

They shook hands and parted.

Back on the street, Treviscoe plunged aggressively ahead, so that Gunn was pressed to keep up with him in spite of his longer legs.

"Will ye take the commission, Alan?"

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"I will, provided the trail be still extant," Treviscoe replied. "Tis why I asked of Sheridan where Lord Fenleigh should be found. If finding the truth to this puzzle is to start anywhere, it needs start with him. If I find nothing there, then there is naught to be found."

He shook his head at a stray thought. "At the Rotunda. What do you think of that, Magnus?"

"Where else should I expect to find a young nobleman?" Gunn replied. "Either at the Rotunda at Ranelagh, or else at Vauxhall Gardens."

"But mark what Sheridan said about Fenleigh staying late at the Rotunda, Magnus. Persons of quality do not haunt Ranelagh past the stroke of twelve, when bawds and rakehells do supplant them. Fenleigh must be partial to such indelicate company.

"Now, I have known libertines of otherwise exquisite taste and refined sentiment, who despite being lechers of the most lewd stripe, were themselves collectors of fine antiquities and art, lovers of books, devotées of the sublime—but never have I heard such a man described as a puppy. How then did a wastrel and spark like Lord Fenleigh become the intimate of an 'aged and sober' librarian? Does that not strike you as queer?"

"So that is the measure of a man's life," said Puckett. "A single pound."

"A pound we could otherwise ill afford," snapped Cecilia. "A pound of silence."

"And how shall we be certain that your cutthroat shall not brag of his murder—nay, of *our* murder—of Morcar Smith to his fellow rogues?"

She fell to his feet, grasped him around the knees, and placed her head on his lap. "Oh, Rupert, do not worry yourself concerning exposure. Tom Splint would have done the deed for ten shillings—the other ten were for his silence, and in his cunning, he knows we may have recourse to his services again. We have bought us our own paladin, my love."

"A paladin? A coarse and stinking villain." Puckett snorted. He began to stroke the back of her neck. "What of Fenleigh? How can he not suspect?"

She looked into his eyes. "Even if he does not, we must look to him, Rupert. He knows too much."

"And how is our paladin to get close to Lord Fenleigh, a man so far above Splint's station as to be on Olympus?"

She broke away from his gaze and rested her head on his lap once more. She gently began to caress him behind his knees. "He cannot, Rupert—you know he cannot."

"Then, Dark Lady, someone must."



He felt her suddenly shiver. His lap was moist—with tears?  
“Yes,” she whispered.

When Magnus Gunn announced to his wife Charlotte that he intended to accompany Alan Treviscoe to the Ranelagh pleasure gardens that night, there was an eruption. Their relationship during eight years of marriage could never have been described as placid, and had not been soothed a particle by the perpetual conflict between Gunn’s fond wish to lead an unassuming domestic existence and Charlotte’s ruling ambition to be accepted into gentle society. This tension gave way to ear-splitting interludes of quarrelling succeeded by unbridled passionate reconciliations. The intervening periods of relative calm were, however, strained by Gunn’s uncompromising affection for Treviscoe, whom Charlotte viewed as the worst sort of adventurer.

An unforeseen armistice between them was grudgingly achieved when their reunion after Gunn’s several years at sea resulted in Charlotte’s being got with child, an event they had both begun to despair of ever occurring. Charlotte’s advanced age (she was now twenty-six) made her husband anxious for her health, and so he sent to Exeter for her relations, her father Erasmus Merwood being a physician, and her sister Elizabeth, herself a spinster at twenty-five, an avocational nurse.

However well-intentioned an intervention, their arrival in town only served to quash the uneasy domestic truce. To Charlotte’s chagrin, not only did Dr. Merwood openly admire Alan Treviscoe, but within her own walls there blossomed an evil weed: Treviscoe and Elizabeth had again become entwined by a tendril of romance that Charlotte believed she had definitively uprooted some years before. She was now under a siege of sorts, and if she saw herself as Andromache, she behaved more like Hector.

Elizabeth tried to smooth the waters by undertaking a miniature watercolour of her sister, her Grecian features to be copied from the striking Gainsborough portrait on display in the parlour. It was meant to be proof of the family’s admiration and esteem for Charlotte, but its impact was negligible.

Gunn’s upcoming incursion to Ranelagh in company with Treviscoe was nothing short of a *casus belli*.

“So I am to be left at home, to wither in my bloom, whilst you and your disreputable—*friend*, I suppose I must style him, though I am ashamed to say it—seek out the company of a known voluptuary.” She was bent over in anger, her fair face glowing like a tear-bedewed pink rose. With her golden hair cascading over her shoulders and bosom, she was a provocative sight.



"'Steeth, my dear, dinna carry on so," Gunn pleaded. "'Tis all in the nature of business—"

"Business? You are going out with him to slake your foul appetite, I know it—you have become too jaded for your own wife."

"Not a bit of it," he replied. "We are seeking out this man, himself a nobleman, in the pursuit of a client, an illustrious client I might mention, of Alan's, and debauchery an't in it."

"A noble who would condescend to speak with that man on behalf of an illustrious client, forsooth," she said mockingly. "An indigent fortune-hunting Irish baron for the one, and another rattish assurance man for the other, I don't misdoubt."

"Not in the least, Charlotte—the peer is an English viscount, and Alan's client is a gentleman of repute, a man of letters, one highly regarded in the most eminent circles."

"Truly?"

"Truly, my love."

She sat on the corner of her bed and snuffled. "Magnus?"

He knelt before her. "Yes, my darling?"

"I should dearly love to dance at Ranelagh."

Treviscoe sat half stunned in the hired boat taking the party to Ranelagh. He had been aroused from a deep sleep by Hero and informed that Gunn had unilaterally pushed forward the trip to the pleasure gardens from eleven o'clock to eight. He had then suffered through Hero not allowing him to dress himself—Gunn had been right about Hero viewing Treviscoe's appearance as a commentary on his competence. Treviscoe was thus extremely well turned out in a black velvet coat trimmed with silver thread, a stiff Mechlin lace cravat puffing out from an embroidered dark green waistcoat, his erstwhile unruly hair curled, queued, and powdered to perfection. He felt an utter fool.

And then there was the matter of the party. He was on a slow burn now, and the object of his ire was the splendid Captain Gunn, grinning and whispering to his wife like a callow youth at a cotillion. Treviscoe had planned a subtle reconnaissance with Gunn as his sole and silent companion, but now found himself saddled with the garrulous Dr. Merwood, the beautiful but imperious Charlotte, and Elizabeth, lovely Elizabeth, who had the power of reducing him into a blithering idiot with the briefest large-eyed glance or leveling him with a single well-placed *mot juste* more pointed than his own smallsword. There had been no chance at preventing it. Once Gunn had capitulated to Charlotte, there was no means to hold back the others.

To Elizabeth, though, the trip up the Thames seemed like a chapter in a lost romance or a scene from a medieval book of hours.



Patches of fog floated above the broad water, obscuring and softening the lights from shore. Other boats slipped in and out of sight, so at times she imagined she was one of a wedge of swans swimming upstream, and at other times she dreamt that they were alone, floating through clouds all the way to the moon. A western breeze, redolent with the bucolic scents of the rural lands upriver, ruffled her hair, making the boatmen pull harder, but transporting her from the filth of London as if by magic.

Disembarking at Ranelagh Stairs was like stepping into a different world. The gardens were artfully tended, and not far away towered the august Rotunda. Strains of music from the building filtered through the trees and hedgerows.

The party paid their admission, and Dr. Merwood complained about parting with five shillings, although Gunn paid for everyone except Treviscoe, and said he hoped the fireworks would well be worth the expenditure of a whole crown, being the evening's crowning glory.

Upon entering the Rotunda, Elizabeth was struck with its elegance and magnificence. The ceiling seemed higher than Westminster Abbey's, so high in fact that the centre support contained within it a clock tower three stories tall crowned with a cupola, housing the largest indoor fireplace she had ever seen. Palladian arches and sculptures abounded. There were eight long tables arranged around the fireplace, and there were innumerable alcoves in the wall with smaller tables. A small orchestra played a stately and graceful minuet.

Gunn rushed to secure an empty alcove as if he were seizing a prize at sea. The ladies and their father with Treviscoe proceeded to the table at a more stately pace.

"How will ye ken Lord Fenleigh when he arrives?" asked Gunn in a vain attempt at *sotto voce*.

"The waiters know him well," Treviscoe said. "I have promised a shilling to the first who points him out to me."

"I thought you were already acquainted with the young lord," Charlotte said disapprovingly. "Surely you do not intend to force yourself upon him."

"I intend to introduce myself on the strength of our common acquaintance, ma'am," Treviscoe replied.

"Look," said Elizabeth, indicating with her fan. "Isn't that Mrs. Puckett, the celebrated actress?"

The woman Elizabeth had pointed out was at the centre of a party of richly dressed young men. There was something entrancing about the apparent ease of her movements, her seemingly effortless poses, and the brightness of her eyes and smile. Her chief admirer was a young man tending to corpulence, overdressed in gold and sil-



ver brocade topped by a fancy blue tie-wig on a head as round as a twenty-four pound shot.

A waiter approached and whispered into Treviscoe's ear. He nodded, his face betraying no emotion but boredom, and reached into his pocket for the coin with which to reward the waiter. "'Pon my soul, so it is," he drawled, "and with her, you see, the rapacious Fenleigh. Excuse me, ladies."

As he stood, a double line formed for a minuet. He was forced around the dancers as Cecilia and her escort walked in the opposite direction.

"Treviscoe, an't it?" said a middle-aged man, stepping right in his path. The man's accoutrements, if less ostentatious than Fenleigh's, still plainly bespoke wealth.

"Mr. Barkway, what a pleasure," Treviscoe remarked automatically. "If you will excuse me, sir—"

"Haven't met Mrs. Barkway, what?" the man said, making no effort to get out of Treviscoe's path. He turned to his short, plump wife, whose ornate lime green dress had been designed for a younger figure. "Last time I saw this young blade was in Bath, my dear. Mrs. Barkway, may I present Mr. Treviscoe. Mr Treviscoe, may I pre—"

"*Enchanté*, madame." Treviscoe bowed. "But I'm afraid I must—"

"He was in fiendish poor health, then, confined to a chair, wasn't he? Lost a bit of a sum on ye, young man, on that occasion, as I recall, but 'tis no matter, as I'm damn'd glad to see you in the pink, sir."

"That is generous of you, Mr. Barkway, but I must beg your indulgence, for I find that there is someone here I must see straight away, on business, sir, which unfortunately can brook no delay. Your servant, sir. Ma'am."

"Business? At Ranelagh? The idea." But Treviscoe was gone.

Mrs. Puckett and Lord Fenleigh had left the building.

When Treviscoe managed to get outside, there was no sign of them. He began to hunt through the gardens, a risky venture, for if the evening was too young for the more rough and tumble activities among the hedgerows, he was nevertheless likely to stumble onto any number of nocturnal trysts of a gentler character. One of the trysts might be between Fenleigh and his actress, but given Fenleigh's ridiculous ensemble, they should not be too difficult to identify.

As he passed the stairs, he saw a small boat with two passengers drift away downstream. In the dim light, he could not be certain who they were. He clenched his fists in frustration. Fenleigh and Mrs. Puckett could be anywhere on the grounds by now. Just then, he overheard a snippet of nervous talk from over the water, from the boat.



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“Be a chum and put that damn’d thing down, what?” a voice wheedled, its rich baritone register at odds with the affectation of its speech. “There’s no cause for this sort of conduct, begad. If we must, we might settle it like gentlemen in Hyde Park, though I daresay it an’t anything worth dyin’ over.”

The reply was muffled. Treviscoe heard a sort of rasping sound followed by a brief knock—the sound of someone shipping an oar, dragging the wood across the gunwale and dropping the pinion in the hole.

Treviscoe peered intensely at the faint image of the boat. The reference to a meeting in Hyde Park worried him: the wooded expanse offered duellists ample area in which to exercise their murderous contests—it would only be offered as an alternative to a more present danger. The speaker had used student patois in asking his antagonist to be a *chum*, that is, a chamber mate. Fenleigh had been recently sent down, and was probably still adhering to his university speech.

“Marriage can’t figure, sir, as she’s just an actress,” said the wheedler. Treviscoe hurried along the shore, trying to keep the boat in sight. The mist parted long enough for Treviscoe to discern from his clothes that the speaker was Fenleigh.

“She’s a goddess, and you are as far beneath her as to dwell in Tartarus.” For the first time, Treviscoe heard Fenleigh’s companion. The voice was hoarse with indignation.

Treviscoe broke into a run. The other man in the boat sat with his back to the bow, facing Fenleigh. He lifted one of the oars out of the water and hefted it like a cricket bat. The image briefly faded into the river mist before emerging ghostlike into view again, but the sounds of the altercation still carried.

“See here—” Fenleigh began, his open hand outstretched.

His antagonist swung the oar in a broad arc directly into the left side of Lord Fenleigh’s head, connecting with a loud *crack* and splintering the wood. Fenleigh fell insensible across the gunwale. His attacker bent over him as if to rob him.

“Stop!” shouted Treviscoe. “Murder! Arrest the boat!”

The attacker looked back at the shore, startled at the cry. He hastily heaved Fenleigh over the side and dropped the oar in the Thames after him.

Treviscoe ran into the water and started swimming for the floating figure of Lord Fenleigh. The boat drifted beyond reach. Treviscoe saw that the attacker pulled hard away, using two oars.

“Go for help, quickly,” Treviscoe shouted back to the shore, where his alarm had caused some pedestrians in the gardens to gather at the water’s edge. He reached Fenleigh and grabbed him by the collar. Fenleigh offered no resistance, and pulling him toward the



bank was like hauling a large sodden bag of corn up a steep flight of stairs. Fenleigh's wig slipped off and floated downstream. The river water drenched their clothes and Treviscoe wondered if he had the strength to get his heavy burden ashore.

He felt he must fail when suddenly helping hands pulled them both out of the river. Water streamed from his hair, white powder smearing on his face and smudging in the creases of his clothes.

"There's a medic in the Rotunda," he gasped. "Merwood. His name's Merwood." He leaned back to catch his breath.

Dr. Merwood, Gunn, and the women were not long in attending him. Charlotte looked at his ruined splendour with shock and distaste, Elizabeth regarded him with shock and concern, and Gunn evinced no shock at all.

Dr. Merwood examined Lord Fenleigh's body as Treviscoe described what had happened, finally shaking his head and frowning.

"Dead, my boy, the vertebrae of the neck quite shattered with the impact," he said.

Only the presence of the women prevented Treviscoe from cursing loud and long. Instead he sat dripping in sullen silence. Finally, he wondered what had become of Fenleigh's alluring companion.

He turned to Elizabeth. "Have you seen Mrs. Puckett anywhere?"

"Why, no, not since your departure from the Rotunda."

He stood and regarded himself. His beautiful new suit was wrecked beyond recovery. He certainly could not return to search for her in public looking this way—he'd be taken for a lunatic.

"What's this?" Merwood pulled several pages of sodden paper folded lengthwise from the viscount's right pocket. It was too dark to read.

They heard several explosions in the air and looked upward. The mist hugged the ground, but the sky was clear. The fireworks brilliantly lit the night. Treviscoe squinted at the pages, able to perceive the writing upon them. It was in archaic script, an English secretary hand.

"'Tis a curse, Dr. Merwood," he said at length, "a curse of death."

Africanus Hero was not a theatre-going man, but in many ways he was better suited to the gathering of certain kinds of information than Treviscoe. He had known some celebrity as a champion boxer when a slave, sport being every bit as much of a public entertainment to all levels of society as plays and operas, and his status as an ostensible domestic meant that he could move in social strata forever barred to his gentlemanly employer. Since Alan Treviscoe was otherwise occupied as a witness at the inquest on the morning following Viscount Fenleigh's death, the task of finding out more about Mrs. Puckett fell to Hero. Treviscoe would have



had to pose as a benefactor of the theatre, or at least a benefactor of women of the theatre, to have had any hope of success in finding out more about the attractive Mrs. Puckett, but Hero could move naturally among her inferiors and be privy to the sort of information that is always known to a lady's servitors, but never to her friends.

His particular contact at Covent Garden was a carpenter, Jeroboam Plugg, who had earned a tidy sum in wagering on Hero's erstwhile pugilistic contests. Dressed in his work clothes, he made a stark contrast with Hero, who was tastefully attired in a brilliant white tie-wig and a dark blue suit that showed his trim figure to good advantage.

"Aye, quite a beauty is our Cecilia," Plugg observed over a pint, "hif not as young as once she was. She was halways generous—" this was accompanied by a broad wink that would not have been out of place on stage—"but she's been on the receiving hend of some generosity 'erself, then. 'Er 'usband don't care for it by 'alf, but hif 'e 'ad as many numbers in pence as in pomes, 'e wouldn't 'ave to complain, now, would 'e?"

"Poems? Mr. Puckett is a poet?"

"Not as 'e ever got paid for it," said Plugg. "While it's 'er generosity what pays for 'is provender, sure enough, still it's mighty jealous 'e be of 'er and 'er gennlemen. 'E 'ad to be banned from the theatre, didn' 'e, so has not to demand satisfaction of ev'ry spark what takes a fancy to 'er, and that's 'alf of London."

"He must have been particularly incensed by the attentions of Lord Fenleigh."

"So I'd 'ave thought meself, but I takes hit that Mr. Puckett was 'oping Fenleigh 'ould become summat of a patron to 'im as well as 'is missus. Mr. Puckett writes plays, y'see, grand tragedies with violent Turks and battles at sea and suchlike. Can't see as Rupert Puckett 'ould kill the goose what laid the golden egg, even 'im being right woeful as a widower these days, what don't venture hout much."

There was more in a similar vein, but nothing of any consequence, so Hero bought Plugg another pint and made his way out of the tavern. As he departed, Plugg was joined by one of his fellow journeymen in the theatre.

"'Ere, Jerry, didn' know you was so fond of mambos, even those what dress up like royal dukes. What was you rattling on with 'im about?"

"Which you're the stupidest bastard what ever lived, Tom Splint. That one is a right avenging angel with his fisticuffs, or so he was in the ring, and if you don't know 'is name, then you've even less brain than I knowed of. Given up boxing, 'e 'as, and is now hin service with a proper gennleman, an' hit was on this gennleman's behalf that 'e sought hout 'is old friend Jeroboam Plugg. I take it that hafter



'earing about fat Fenleigh's departure from this world, 'is master 'as 'is eye on our Cecilia, and 'oo could blame 'im?"

"'E was haskin' questions about Mrs. Puckett and Lord Fenleigh, was 'e?"

"Now what's wrong wiv 'at?"

"There was no mention of the manuscript at the inquest," said Puckett, putting his hat down on the table. "We are safe for the present."

Cecilia's wide eyes stared vacantly at him from where she sprawled on the bed. She had been excused from the inquest on account of a sudden malady, a malady that was not, for once, a ploy. Puckett could see despair coursing through her body like a poison.

"Didst hear me, Dark Lady? We are safe." He sat down beside her and tenderly stroked her hair, which spilled wildly from her nightcap.

"Why did you not recover it, Rupert? I can hear them whispering. They know, my love, they know."

"Hush, now," he said, taking her in his arms, rocking her like a child. "You know why I could not recover the manuscript. There was no time, once the cry went out. I was forced to flee as quickly as I could."

"We are not safe," she said, stiffening. "Fenleigh wants revenge."

"What are you talking about? Fenleigh is dead."

She stared at him hard in the face. "Fenleigh still seeks his vengeance, Rupert."

"Fenleigh cannot avenge himself from beyond the grave."

She laughed. It was almost a bark. "Can he not? Then how was his black spirit asking after me in Covent Garden, Rupert?"

"Whatever can you mean?"

"It is true. Tom was here. A man as black as the devil was making inquiries about me at the Garden, but it was not truly just a man, Rupert." She lowered her voice as if to impart a childish secret. "Tom saw it, and said it was an avenging angel. It must have been Fenleigh's spirit come back to torment me."

This is madness, Puckett thought, but he could not bring himself to say it aloud. His eyes looked steadily out the window. If this man had been looking into Cecilia's affairs, he might also be trying to find out more about Puckett himself, and that meant that sooner or later he might pry his way to Grub Street. It would be best to be warned if that were the case. Puckett began a letter, then paused, overcome with anger.

Avenging angel, was he? Whoever this black man was, he would be a spectre soon enough.

... and this husband of hers, Mr. Rupert Puckett, an impecu-



nious poet of morose temperament, is known to be jealous of her attachments to gentlemen," said Hero, consulting his notes. "It should not be hard to imagine, Mr. Treviscoe, that it was Mr. Puckett in the boat with Lord Fenleigh, and that Mr. Puckett killed Lord Fenleigh out of jealousy, knowing him to be his wife's lover, in spite of Puckett's hope that Lord Fenleigh might promote his literary endeavours."

"But can there be any proof?" asked Gunn. The three of them sat at Treviscoe's table in Lloyd's in the Royal Exchange.

Hero shook his head. "None, absent more evidence."

"In the event, 'twas not a murder occasioned by a moment of passion, but a cold-blooded assassination," said Treviscoe, "and I so stated at the inquest."

"Ye didn't tell them why ye were so close at hand, I'll wager," said Gunn.

"Indeed not. I only accepted Mr. Sheridan's commission this morning, and so I could honestly testify that I was at Ranelagh last night in the company of my friends for my own purposes. And to be honest, if the murderer was present at the inquest, as I should have been, were I he, then I did not want to give him any reason to suspect that my being present at Lord Fenleigh's demise was anything but coincidental. It was a planned murder, sure enough, and the man who would so deliberately plan such a brutal undertaking need have no qualms against harming another arrayed against him."

"How can you be so convinced it was planned? An oar's a clumsy weapon."

"Why else would the boatman have discarded the oar he used to kill Fenleigh, and yet have a third oar at hand, unless he knew to have two oars remaining with which to pull away?"

"Ye dinna think the third oar was a spare one, then," said Gunn. He sighed and looked up from his newspaper. "Nor can I, forsooth. All this supposing on murder is very taxing on one's mentality. Another coffee's what's needed."

Hero hailed one of the waiters.

Treviscoe held up his index finger to make another point. "Furthermore, this murder was executed in such a manner as to shew it was meant not to be found out, another indication that it had been carefully planned. Fenleigh's reliquia might have washed up ashore in Westminster, or they might have floated as far as the city, or even to the sea before they were discovered, if they were discovered at all. There are folk on the waterway who make their livelihoods plundering the dead in the river, and we would ne'er have heard more of him had they found him first. Even had Fenleigh's corpse been found and identified by a one wholly disinterested, no

one might have guessed his death to be anything but an accident."

"Three cups of coffee, please," Hero instructed the waiter.

Treviscoe shook his head and turned again to the sheets spread on the table, comparing them to an octavo volume held in his right hand.

"Mr. Puckett's poetic ambitions are worthy of more scrutiny. A poet would make the best forger of such a thing as a pinchbeck Shakespeare. I had thought that I might demonstrate that this manuscript is a counterfeit by a scrupulous perusal of the text, applying comparison with the English version of Cervantes. I have here Smollett's translation of *Quixote*, but the author of *Cardenio* does not seem to have plagiarised it. Then again, I thought *Cardenio* might contain a more modern word than known to Shakespeare, proving its inauthenticity."

"Like that new word you taught to Sheridan, whatever it was."

"Provenance: But there is too little here for me to detect any such diction, and I am not confident I have got the etymological skill equal to such a task, even should the entire play be laid out before me."

"Does not Fenleigh's murder weigh heavily in favour of interpreting this manuscript false?" asked Hero.

"Unquestionably, but it is no proof. What if Fenleigh were killed so that he might be robbed of something else? A fine watch, a purse filled with guineas, an expensive hat? There are plenty of such murders." Treviscoe sighed in frustration.

"Aye, and for less," said Hero. "But, sir, I think you might be making an error in choosing such a new translation of *Don Quixote* as Smollett's, if you are trying to detect plagiarism. Among those of this century, I find I prefer Jarvis's translation to Smollett's, as being closer to the proper cadence of the Spanish, but in two hundred years, *Don Quixote* has been translated into English many times. If the hoax were in trying to revive such old-fashioned speech as Shakespeare's, the author of it would more likely rob a translation made closer to Shakespeare's own time."

"Ye mean to say ye can talk Spanish, Hero?" asked Gunn incredulously.

"An understanding of Spanish is not so rare in the West Indies, Captain Gunn, and wherever Spanish is spoken, there folk are sure to read Cervantes."

"But if *Quixote* exists in a multitude of translations, I should have to read every single one before reaching any conclusion," said Treviscoe. "It would take weeks. There must be a more fortunate method."

The waiter arrived with three small cups of coffee, and Gunn fumbled for his purse for the three pennies to pay for them. In so doing,



he upset his own cup and spilled it onto the table. Hero and Treviscoe hurriedly grabbed the pages lying on the table before the beverage could seep into them.

"I dinna know what harm coffee could do to yon manuscript worse than what was done by the Thames," Gunn growled.

Hero regarded his frilled shirt cuffs with anguish. "Stap me, 'tis stained. And this shirt freshly laundered just this week."

Treviscoe regarded the transparent brown liquid on the table with indifference. His face went suddenly blank. When he returned to himself, he said, "Magnus, I seem to recall that Elizabeth Merwood used to be an uncommon good hand at watercolours."

Gunn furrowed his brow at this sudden change of topic. "She still is." He pulled out his snuff box, lifted the lid, and pulled out an oval of grey paper. "See here."

It was Elizabeth's deftly painted miniature of Charlotte.

Treviscoe stood and grabbed his hat and swordbelt. "I know 'tis unfashionable to call upon a lady so late in the afternoon, but I must speak with her at once."

Hero cleared his throat. "Whilst you are speaking with Miss Merwood, sir, I shall hie myself to Grub Street and query the book-sellers. As Mr. Puckett is a versifier, he is likely to have tried publishing some of his work, even if at his own expense. They may know more of him there."

"A capital suggestion, Hero. Come, Magnus."

Charlotte and Elizabeth sat in the parlour stitching. Charlotte treated her needle like a stiletto, stabbing the fabric with unnecessary force and scowling at the results.

"Impossible, wretched man," she said.

"Who is impossible?" Elizabeth demurely asked.

"I have tried to warn you," Charlotte replied. "Nothing attends that man but disreputation and havoc. Why, he can't even take a party dancing without turning it into a murder."

"Ah. Mr. Treviscoe. You needn't worry, Charlotte—that was finished a long time ago."

Charlotte looked across the room with hurt consternation at her sister. "I thought it was, I truly did. What sacrifices have I not made to ensure that you escaped being ensnared by such a—I can only describe him as an utter rascal, sister. But here he is again, and I have seen the doting expression on your face when you are next to him. Beware, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth did not react to the absurd proposition that Charlotte had ever sacrificed anything for her sake, but she felt mortified that her feelings could be so easily read when she was at such pains to conceal them.

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"I am well aware of the disadvantages attending Mr. Treviscoe," she replied evenly, "but you must confess, Charlotte, that his attempted rescue of Lord Fenleigh does him no discredit, quite to the contrary. It was a noble, even an heroic, act."

Before Charlotte could respond to this recalcitrant observation, they were interrupted by the sound of the front door opening, and the arrival of Gunn and Treviscoe.

The ladies stood. Treviscoe bowed and muttered a polite greeting. The ladies curtsied, Charlotte as stiff and formal as a soldier at inspection, Elizabeth with customary grace.

"Forgive this intrusion, but I have something to ask of Miss Merwood, and something special to shew her."

Panic filled Charlotte's wide eyes, subsiding only slightly when Treviscoe pulled several pages of folded paper from his pocket.

"Can you tell me what you make of these, ma'am?" he said, offering them to Elizabeth.

She accepted them and looked them over, her face showing signs of mild bewilderment.

"I should say that it is an excellent facsimile of a sixteenth or seventeenth century play," she said, "although I cannot judge from the words themselves, as the chirography closely mimics an ancient style, and it is very hard to read."

"But why do you say it is a facsimile and not an original?"

"Why, the ink, sir. This was writ with Roman sepia ink, such as I use when I paint in monochrome. Sepia is made from the ink of the cuttlefish, and is a most recent innovation. It replaces bistre, the facture of which depends on the soot of burnt wood, and is considerably more expensive."

"Be so kind as to instruct me as to how sepia may be so easily differentiated from bistre."

"The colour, sir. These are the pages you recovered from Lord Fenleigh's pocket at Ranelagh, are they not? Not even immersion in the Thames could cause such a recent application of pigment to fade beyond recognition. Sepia is a warm kind of brown, tending to the red, but bistre has more of a greenish tinge. There is no doubt, sir, that this is sepia."

Treviscoe took the pages back and stuffed them unceremoniously back into his coat pocket. He then made a most ceremonious bow. Meeting her eyes, his face blazed with delight.

"You have made me most grateful, Miss Merwood. I scarce know how to repay your kindness." He took her hand and kissed it.

Charlotte's hands clutched her skirt, her lips quivered, and her enormous blue eyes widened in horror. But before she could think of anything to say, Treviscoe resolutely stood and clapped his hand on Gunn's shoulder. "Let us convey the news to Mr. Sheridan forthwith,

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Magnus, and ask him what he knows concerning Rupert Puckett."

Bowing and mumbling their farewells, they were out of the room like greyhounds.

Charlotte took a deep breath and appeared to have regained her composure. Sitting once more, her stitching in hand, she said to herself, "I felt certain he was going to ask—and shew—something else. Thank God."

Elizabeth watched from the window as the men briskly walked away. Her thoughts warmed her, but she did not give them voice.

"'Twas the coffee—coffee being brown—put me onto it, Magnus, and Hero's complaint over his shirt," explained Treviscoe. "Sheridan made a point of it that the manuscript was in brown ink, in concert with the variety of inks used early in the last century, but today no one writes with other than black ink. (Did you know that there was recently a patent awarded for coloured printer's ink? Soon the newspapers will be as colourful as peacocks.) So the question was, if *Cardenio* is a forgery, from whence did the forger get his coloured ink, such inks being rare? Rare with the exception, of course, of their application to monochrome paintings, which are as plentiful as gin mills in a rookery. It stood to reason that the formula in current use by eighteenth century artists might not be the same as used by seventeenth century scribes, and so it proved."

"So Sheridan's suspicions are confirmed. I canna think he'll be pleased, however, to lose a new Shakespeare."

"Better than to be made out an ingenuous gull. If the play were to be performed, and it were subsequently divulged—" Treviscoe stopped dead, and Gunn was several steps beyond him before he noticed.

"But why?" Treviscoe asked himself. "I thought I had it all, but it makes no sense."

"What makes no sense?" asked Gunn as he returned to Treviscoe's side.

"Why did Fenleigh have the manuscript with him at Ranelagh? He wasn't likely to bring it so he could read it, not with so many frivolous entertainments there to amuse him, and certainly not in the dark."

"Why, he brought it because—because—"

"Because he must have meant to give it or sell it to someone. Who could it have been, since he had already offered it to Sheridan? Who else but the forger himself? I thought I saw the murderer quickly try to search him just before I cried out. He must have been after the script, but for what purpose? Certainly not to perform it elsewhere, not when its owner had just been murdered."

"We suspect Puckett of both crimes, forgery and murder. Perhaps



it was an attempt to recover the manuscript, so that the forgery could no' be proven."

"But why murder Fenleigh at all, if Fenleigh was there to provide the manuscript to him in the first place?"

"Mayhap Puckett wasna prepared to meet Fenleigh's price for silence—Mrs. Puckett, I should think—and thought to keep the manuscript and his wife both. You heard them argue over a woman."

"Fenleigh said unequivocally that the cause of their quarrel wasn't worth dying over. More the words of a man who is willing to give in than one who will stand his ground no matter the cost, I should say. Furthermore, he said that she was 'just an actress,' as if she were someone who could easily be replaced in his affections. Fenleigh didn't sound to me like a man who was making threats. Contrariwise, he acted like someone who was receiving them."

Treviscoe slowly began to walk again. "I have missed something, Magnus. Perhaps we should confer with Hero and hear what he has found out about Mr. Puckett before going direct to Sheridan."

"**T**wenty-four books of the most high-blown ostentation, and in verse scarce distinguishable from doggerel," said Mr. Spurry, pulling two brown duodecimo volumes from a high shelf. "Here 'tis. *The Acriad*. Even the title is ridiculous and ill sounding."

"What is its topic?" asked Hero, examining the books as they were handed to him.

"It deals, in the most artificial and turgid language, with the defense of Acre by the Templars and Hospitalers in 1291, which was the last stand of the Crusader kingdom of Outremer against the Saracens. I cannot imagine a topic less amiable to the modern reader, but the poet would not be dissuaded. Somewhere Hume has written of the Crusades—" Spurry fumbled for a book—"here it is, in the first volume of the *History of England*: 'the most signal and most durable monument of human folly, that has yet appeared in any age or nation.' Just the stuff of an epic poem, what? Young Sheridan wagged that the sentiments of Mr. Pope's *Dunciad* were absolutely Homeric by comparison to Puckett's."

"Do you mean Richard Sheridan, the playwright, knew of this work? Most interesting. In a way, I am here on Mr. Sheridan's behalf."

"His behalf? Whatever for? I shouldn't bother then, were I you, for he knows it well. There was a furious exchange of wit between Mr. Sheridan and Mr. Puckett when Mr. Puckett had it printed. Sheridan absolutely annihilated his adversary, there being few who can match his sharp tongue, and Puckett was made a laughingstock."

"In that case, I take it that there can be no love lost between them."



"I don't think Sheridan, being so far above him, would consider Puckett worthy of his enmity, but as for Puckett—I should very much expect that he blames Sheridan for his ruination. No one will print anything of his now."

"A lost reputation is a heavy loss indeed. I shall purchase these books, if you please, Mr. Spurry, and you have my thanks on it." Hero pulled out his purse and counted out the several shillings to pay for the two books.

"The pleasure is mine," said Spurry with a broad smile, rubbing the shillings in his palm. "If I find aught else of Mr. Puckett's, would you be interested, sir?"

"I might, indeed."

"And where should I be able to find you, sir?"

"You should enquire after Mr. Treviscoe at Lloyd's."

"Very good, sir. Your servant."

"Your servant, sir." Hero returned the bookseller's nod, and pulled open the door leading outside.

Spurry watched as Hero made his way onto the narrow, crowded street. His smile instantly vanished. The coins disappeared into his waistcoat pocket. "Humph. At Lloyd's, is he? Meddlesome savage."

He pulled a sheet of foolscap from his desk, perched on his stool, and hurriedly wrote a note, his tongue protruding from the corner of his mouth as he concentrated. Satisfied, he sealed the letter and then walked back into the printing room, where his apprentice was busy pressing pamphlets. He cast a critical eye on the stack already printed, but what he saw pleased him. The pamphlets were of the most scurrilous kind, pressing the limits of legality and overstepping the boundaries of good taste, but Spurry depended on them for the largest part of his modest income.

"Be a good lad, Sam, and deliver this letter to Maiden Lane," he said, turning the letter over to the boy. Sam had just enough wit to wipe the ink from his hands before he took the letter.

"Shall I wait for an answer, Mr. Spurry?"

"No, boy—I reckon Mr. Puckett shall want to reply in person, and with his purse. Off with you now, for it's some distance."

The exact location of Mrs. Puckett's lodgings was not difficult for Hero to ascertain. He simply asked the various mongers in Covent Garden. As he climbed the stairs to the apartment in Maiden Lane, a dirty boy brushed by him going the opposite direction on the stairs. Although he knew he should notify Treviscoe that he had found Puckett's lair, he decided to make absolutely certain of the address first.

He knocked at the door.

"Who is there?" A woman's voice, sweet and beckoning.



"Mrs. Puckett?"

The door opened a crack, just enough for an azure eye to peer out. It slammed shut immediately. He thought he heard wild giggling on the other side.

Concerned, he gently knocked again.

"Away with you, whether demon or man!" The voice was less dulcet now.

"I mean no disrespect, madam—"

"I know what you are. Away! Get thee hence!"

Hero paused, at a loss at what to do, but decided nothing could be gained by remaining. "I regret most sincerely the imposition, madam. I shall retire forthwith."

He was on the street by the time he heard the bloodcurdling scream from upstairs.

The murmuring of the crowd was like the buzzing of so many bees in Puckett's ears as he bounded up the stairs. His landlady, Mrs. Goff, stood ashen-faced at the entrance to his chambers.

"You don't want to go in there, sir," she said. "It an't a sight for any man to behold, sir. Let us wait for the charlie, sir, which he's on his way."

He pushed her aside and entered. The floor was covered in blood. Crying out, he fell to his knees. He pried Cecilia's fingers from the dagger she had pushed into her bosom, and pulled the crumpled paper from her other hand. It was not, as he feared, a suicide note, but a letter from Charity Spurry, the man who had printed his epic.

Enquire after Mr. Treviscoe at Lloyd's, it said. He is Sheridan's agent.

"Dark Lady—no. No. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow—"

He burst into tears. He choked as he spoke: "—the way to dusty death—"

He hardened. He wiped the tears from his face, unheeding of the bloody smear he put in their stead. He pulled out the knife and wiped it clean on his wife's calico skirts.

"I will not yield, to kiss the ground before Malcolm's feet and to be baited with the rabble's curse," he hissed, standing. Seeing the look in his eyes, Mrs. Goff squeaked in fright and made way.

"Yet I will try my last," he told her coldly as he passed. "Before my body I throw the warlike shield." He stumbled down the stairs.

With the illogic of the mob, those who had gathered on the street ignored the fact that Puckett had arrived after the scream had abruptly ended. What they saw was a man with a knife and blood on his face. Puckett, aloof and lugubrious at his best, had never been liked in the neighbourhood; and now the ill will he had inspired around him frothed over into something far worse.



"Killed his wife, he has," someone shouted.

"No, hold!" cried Hero, jostled by the crowd. "Why, he wasn't yet at home when she died—"

"What do you mean?" snarled the man next to him. "Look at him!"

"Butchered her!" shouted another.

An empty gin bottle arced threw the air and struck Puckett on the shoulder. A stone followed. Then the pelting rain of rocks and debris brought him down.

"'Tis universally believed that she lost her life, not to herself, but to him," said Sheridan, "that his jealousy finally burst from its uneasy containment, and with a fury unrestrained, he stabbed her through the heart. Egad, but she gave him cause enough." He shook his head and frowned. "Irony has its place in the drama, Alan: it commends to us the importance of a life without hypocrisy or pride. But did you know that the same Charity Spurry who sent Puckett the note warning him of you has recently published a new pamphlet entitled 'The Murder of Mrs. Puckett'? They're selling like hot cross buns on every street corner from the Isle of Dogs to Kensington. I fear that irony is far less congenial in real life than in the theatre."

He poured a brandy for Treviscoe, who was dressed hardly less splendidly than he had been during his visit to Ranelagh. This time, Hero had made sure that Treviscoe was fit to be seen at Almack's Club.

"I am powerful glad Puckett never made it as far as Lloyd's," said Treviscoe. "I cannot but conceive that he had resolved to murder me, or Hero—but I cannot accept that he murdered Cecilia, Richard. His intense devotion to her after so many years of flagrant infidelity on her part should never be so blithely discounted. Rather, I think that everything he did, he must have done for love of her, to win her back somehow, had she not travelled even beyond love's power to rescue her."

"Well, for once, we should be glad of the mob's wrath," Sheridan observed.

"Should we, indeed?" mused Treviscoe. "Twould be preferred, if only from a philosophical point of view, that Puckett survived it. There is much unexplained in this grim adventure, and I've been thinking hard on't, and Rupert Puckett, the only man who had it in his power to provide answers to my questions, can now never give tongue to them."

Sheridan's forehead wrinkled. "What do you mean, Alan?"

"For a start, was it he who killed Morcar Smith, or was it an accident of fate Smith should die, or did some foul lieutenant in the service of Puckett's *arrivisme* escape justice? Can we now ever know who was it copied the play in a creditable secretary hand? And pray



tell me, why did Fenleigh bring the false manuscript of *Cardenio* with him to Ranelagh? We suppose 'twas to provide it to Puckett, but why should Puckett desire it? 'Twere better used to convince you of the play's veracity, as it convinced Hixon and Mr. Lawne. Yet for some reason Puckett wanted it, and wanted it desperately, so desperately that Fenleigh was to be condemned to a watery grave, where he should be forever beyond mortal interrogation. Of all the synopses of these events that I have considered, only one possibility explains such a circumstance to my satisfaction."

"And what is that?"

Treviscoe's face betrayed a bittersweet smile. "Frederick Hixon, as you have observed, is not a total clod-pate. Even I must admit that he has a talent for discerning somewhat of the truth in confusion's very midst. He had determined, as you recall, that an unnamed person of quality had purchased liberally from the library of Mr. Stede, and that Morcar Smith had catalogued the same, and that Smith had found therein a receipt for what was called 'The Spanish Play'."

"Surely Smith was Fenleigh's confederate in the deception. It seems likely to me that the receipt was itself a mere forgery."

"*Au contraire*, Richard. After you solicited my help, I made a remark to Magnus that Morcar Smith and Lord Fenleigh were most unlikely confederates. That they were acquainted is a fact, and cannot be gainsaid—but what was the source of that acquaintance? Smith was a man of good repute, sober, scholarly, held in esteem—the very antithesis of Fenleigh. Was it not therefore possible that Smith had been introduced to Fenleigh by someone with an interest in the viscount, for the purpose of curbing Fenleigh's uproarious and puerile behaviour? Such bacchanalian appetite as Fenleigh was wont to have is generally formed in an adolescence unruléd by firm counsel.

"Through separate enquiry, I satisfied myself that this was so. Morcar Smith was some years ago drafted to assist in the viscount's information, in short, to make something of the young wretch before he left to make a buffoon of himself at Oxford. Fenleigh's guardian (his uncle, if you must know who) had ensured himself that Smith was the man wanted for this particular labour, as he had not only substantial learning, but was also irreproachable in character.

"So in keeping with what is actually known of him, let us assume that the receipt was genuine, and that 'The Spanish Play' actually existed, and was purchased by the anonymous worthy, as claimed, from Mr. Stede. It means, you must agree—"

Sheridan blanched and finished the sentence, "—that Morcar Smith mayhap put his hands on the genuine *Cardenio*."

Treviscoe nodded slowly. "Precisely, Richard. At first, I should think that Smith did not know what he had, but was simply in-

trigued at finding the receipt for an old play, and spoke of what my French cousins might call his *trouvaille* to his old pupil. Fenleigh might then have mentioned it to the one person he knew who would be interested in an old play, *videlicet*, his actress lover, the celebrated Cecilia Puckett. Was it she conceived the idea of forging Shakespeare's lost play? Another unanswerable question. In any event, the scheme to defraud you was born. It was then, after the plot was in motion, I believe, that Morcar Smith succeeded in finding the true play. Of course he would have told Fenleigh, and once the other conspirators were made aware—well, their plans perforce must change to account for it.

"When you consider all that has happened, 'tis the sole circumstance that would render Puckett's forgery utterly useless, and would compel its recovery at all costs. Furthermore, the life of any man knowing of the genuine *Cardenio*'s existence were no more worth a curse—if you'll pardon an unfortunate choice of expression, knowing as I do of how vulnerable you persons of the theatre are to such balderdash—to a man with naught to lose, but whose futurity depended upon it never being found. Methinks that Puckett, having tasted the bile of humiliation in full measure once, could never have tolerated it again, without oblivion itself being preferred. Only it seems he preferred the oblivion of others to his own."

"But if this is true," Sheridan said excitedly, gripping his goblet with unusual force, "where is the genuine *Cardenio* now? Do you think Puckett destroyed it?"

"Destroy the work of his hero? I think not. But as to its whereabouts—"

Treviscoe shrugged.

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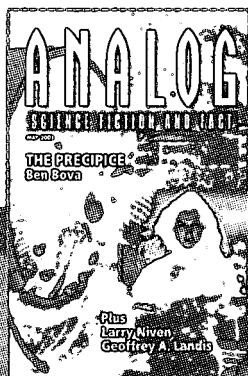
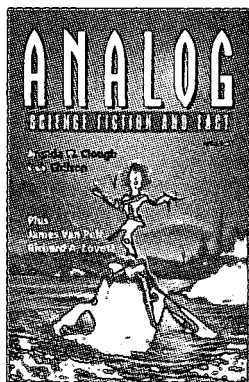
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FICTION

THE SOLOMON

D. A. McGuire



Illustration by Meredith Lightbown

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 3/03

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What do you do when you have something to hide? What do you do when something happens, something totally unconnected to you, but which throws suspicion at your doorstep? There's an old saying that goes, "Keep your friends close, but keep your enemies closer."

What do you do when you have no friends?

He stood at the head of the beach, at the point where the high tide never reaches, except in a storm. A long line of sea lettuce, sea grasses, and the fat lobes of non-indigenous green fleece were mostly blackened and desiccated by lying in the sun just above the high tide mark. The desolate stretch of rocky gray shoreline ended at a line of misshapen boulders extending out into the water like a row of soldiers.

Like drunken soldiers, he thought to himself, toppled-over and up-ended soldiers. They were the remains of an old jetty, which in another hundred years or so would be consumed by the Atlantic. He knew that there were storms which could move the largest of the large boulders, even some as tall as a man and twice again as wide.

She knew it, too. The ocean would always win, no matter the walls, dikes, and jetties laid out by human hands. Old North Jetty had been put down in 1845, but its stones were strewn about wildly, leaving only a dim outline of the supposedly impregnable bulwark it once had been. Yet despite its condition, it still retained its ability to withhold, contain, and destroy. A group from town had petitioned for the jetty's removal, claiming its existence was ruining the beaches farther south. Well, she thought, today it's ruining more than beaches, for wedged between two of the largest rocks—a giant slab of cracked mica schist and a gray bull of granite sprinkled through with flecks of pink feldspar—was a boat.

Or a ship. She couldn't be sure. She wasn't a native to this shore, or so she had to claim. But boat or ship, it was stuck fast between two rocks. A small group of men scrambled up and down the jetty. Still others were out on boats, riding up and down in the slippery surf. They were struggling to gain hold and perhaps to make sense of why this boat—this sturdy-looking, forty-foot pleasure craft—was wedged so tightly there. Some of the men had ropes; one had a long spar, or boat hook, in his hands. But all were shouting, talking, and gesturing in the cold autumn wind. Painted on her transom, the side facing the man standing in front of her and watching these frantic proceedings, was the boat's name, the *Solomon*. Written quite boldly too, she thought, for she had dabbled in art and learned calligraphy years ago. (That skill had been an essential part of her world not long ago, bringing her into contact with many wealthy women looking for activities with which to occupy their time.) She knew let-

tering like that required both skill and effort. But now those highly stylized letters were leaning hard to port. And even with the mist and the wind, she knew something else: that though this was the *Solomon*, part of her name was missing. She was the *Solomon Something*.

Perhaps she'd voiced her puzzlement aloud, because suddenly he was saying, "You're right. Second half of the name's been scraped off. Maybe she got pulled from her mooring in the storm." The man turned to look at her. Dressed in a black pea jacket, collar turned up against his neck, he looked like a sailor or fisherman.

"Yes," he said, reading the frown on her face. "Who scrapes off half the name on a boat, then puts it into the water? Same for the numbers along the bow. Most of them are scraped off, except for the same three numbers on either side: eight, six, seven. The others can still be read, though. Boat's out of Maine. Strange, don't you think?"

"I suppose." She hadn't wanted to initiate a conversation with this stranger. She'd only come down from the house because she was curious, and for that she should have known better. Curiosity killed more than just the cats where she had come from. You attended only to what was your business, and what things you needed to know, and ignored the rest; it had been the first rule of survival in that other world.

This world, where boats got caught between the broken rocks of an ancient and decrepit jetty, was still an alien and unknown place. If she could have gotten away without calling the police to notify them the boat was out here, she would have.

Truth was, she was the only one around for miles. Her house was the closest, sitting up there on the bluff beyond the dunes and salt marsh. If she hadn't called it in and waited instead for some beachcomber or passing boat to report it—both rare this time of year, late November—then someone would surely have come to ask her why she *hadn't* called the police, and she could ill afford to raise anyone's suspicion, especially the local authorities.

She realized he was waiting for more of a response, so she said, "I don't know much about boats."

"We got the HIN numbers," he said, then explained, "Hull identification numbers. They'll tell us who owns it."

She just nodded.

Then he said, "You're from up there, aren't you?"

Reluctant to offer more than what was absolutely necessary, she didn't respond immediately. A mistake, she knew, to arouse this man's suspicion. She still was learning how to move in this world. So that pause, error though it was, was compounded suddenly by an even worse one: she hadn't realized who—or what—he was, not at first.

He was a cop. A policeman in a worn-out pea jacket, a man who

needed a shave, whose eyes were heavy, dark, and tired—but astute. He was reading her as quickly as, and possibly better than, she was reading him.

“Yes,” she answered. “I . . . called about this.” She nodded to the boat. The men were now moving ropes around it. Cautiously stationed about twenty yards farther out there was the larger harbor patrol cruiser. Also out there were rocks that moved and tumbled apart in every new storm. No one was taking any chance that by pulling out this trapped boat another would be wrecked with it.

The man removed a small notebook from one pocket, a ballpoint pen from another, gave her an inquisitive look, then as the pages flapped in the light wind, said, “Melanie Wilkerson?”

She nodded. It had been another mistake coming down to the beach. She should have stayed up in the house, watched from a window perhaps, but not walked out here to see what was going on. Curiosity . . .

Then he asked, “Could we go up to the house, Miss, Mrs.?”

“Melanie.”

“Melanie. Mac Jackson,” he said, offering his hand. “Westfleet Police. Do you mind? I have a few questions to ask.”

She paused, making perhaps the third or fourth mistake since waking up before dawn, five hours earlier. That’s when she’d heard the distant banging of wood upon rock as the boat, carried in on the rising tide, had been pushed up between the rocks.

But what was one more mistake when she’d already made so many?

“I thought it was a shutter, or . . . I don’t know, a loose gutter.” She didn’t like to sound so indefinite. The man had come into the kitchen behind her, quietly closing the door. She was uneasy for a moment, aware she hadn’t asked for any identification, which was foolish of her. She turned around as he paused to write something down on the notepad. He was not a huge man, maybe five seven, five eight, and fairly slight of build despite the heavy cut of his face. With the growth of what looked like two or three days’ beard, he was probably trying to look older, tougher, to compensate for his size. She knew the type. She also knew she had nothing to fear from him physically; she could handle him—that is, if he weren’t a cop.

He didn’t take off his coat, just looked around the kitchen and asked, “You’re the caretaker here, is that correct? For Mr. Jonathan Ross, the horror writer?”

“Yes.” She had to relax quickly. This was just a formality, she told herself.

“Mr. Ross . . . he’s not here too often.”

Was that a question? She decided to treat it like one: “Just a few weeks in summer.”

"Must be nice." He looked around again. The kitchen was expansive, full of windows looking out onto the marsh and the slope of pristine woods above. Red, cream, and black, filled with expensive appliances. It was the kind of kitchen the rich built without ever having much need for it. The only appliance that ever got regular use was the coffee maker that sat atop a counter of pale white granite.

"I guess you can write a few crummy novels, make a million bucks, and have homes all over the world," he said.

She made no response to that; what was there to say?

"So, Melanie," he went on, "why don't you tell me what made you go out to the jetty at—" another referral to his notes "—three in the morning? A banging sound?" He looked toward the rear part of the house, into the dining room and out the bay windows there. The water, the jetty, the beaches were just beyond. "You could hear the boat hitting the rocks all that way? You a light sleeper?"

"I suppose I am," she said. "Maybe I was already awake. I don't remember. I got up, and . . ." She shrugged. How would any other human being on the face of the Earth react? With aggravation? Curiosity or indifference? Should she offer to be of assistance? But why, and how did she do that? Truth is, she had no idea how to react. She was far too involved in her own self-protection to know. If she'd only had more time, some warning that she'd be questioned so intently. If you called in a hit-and-run, did they subject you to this kind of inquiry? What if you were witness to a bank robbery and you saw the robbers run out of the bank? Would the police question you like this?

Maybe they would.

"You got dressed and went outside, checked the house?"

"Yes."

"Three A.M., Melanie. Still dark."

"Of course it was. I took a flashlight. I have a rather large . . . I can show you."

"No." He shook his head, sighed. He must have been pulled out of bed on this dreary, foggy morning just to check out what must be a routine call, no more extraordinary than responding to a loud party disturbing the peace.

She'd have to hold that thought. It was important he think of this as no more than a routine call. For truth was, the boat out there had absolutely nothing to do with her. She knew that, but he didn't. And because of that, her heart had sunk the moment she'd seen it.

Not that she had any fear of going to the police if she had good cause. It's just that this boat, its name partly smudged out and some of its numbers gone, hit too close to a different reality, one from which she had fought hard to escape.

"So you got dressed, grabbed your flashlight, and walked across the

marsh in the dark? It was still raining at three—" He was distracted momentarily by a large gray cat that came padding into the room to sit close to his feet. "—wasn't it?"

"Yes." She stooped and lifted the cat into her arms. "But more like a light mist. I couldn't see what was making the sound, but I could tell it was coming from the beach. As I got nearer I could make out a dim shape against the rocks. If it was a boat and there were people in trouble . . ." She pressed the cat to her face and shrugged. "Couldn't he figure out the rest?"

"No people in trouble," he grinned wryly, drew in a deep breath that was the suppression of a yawn. Then with a nod at the cat, he asked: "Got a name?"

"No."

He didn't even register any surprise, instead said, "Do you mind?" indicating the phone on the wall by the door. "Left mine on all night and the battery's dead."

"Go right ahead," she said.

The next morning wasn't much better. She spent too much time walking back and forth in front of the bay window, struggling to see through the early morning mist. They'd brought in a larger craft, and probably hired an expert crew who knew what to do in cases like this, but the *Solomon* still hadn't been moved. She could tell that even without the binoculars.

So it wasn't over yet. If it were, she could have got on with her life. Instead she was left with a great uneasiness hanging over her. The police officer had been a bit brusque, but polite, and she had detected no sense of unease or suspicion toward herself. And yet she couldn't shake the feeling that he had said something, or looked at her in a certain way that . . .

Do experienced police officers have instincts for this kind of thing, and can they tell when a person has something to hide, she wondered. Or had she watched too many police dramas on television? She seldom watched anything on television these days. All the same, she had the disquieting feeling that he was going to check up on her, even though he had no reason to do so.

Unless it was a very routine check—the police always do that, don't they? Investigate the witnesses, make sure they're reliable. How many times has that first call in regarding an arson, a murder, or whatever, been made by the perpetrator? More than once, she knew, and in his line of business there was no such thing as being too careful.

It had once been the same in her business, too.

So though she hated to do it, she knew what she had to do. It would make her feel helpless and at the mercy of forces she'd sought

to control most of her life. But unfortunately the *Solomon*, and Officer Mac Jackson, had left her with little choice.

As the gray cat watched from the bureau, she packed them away that same afternoon. One at a time, after carefully wiping each one clean, she placed them in the specially designed case. It was leather, lined with orange felt, the gift of an old friend, now deceased. She wore gloves while doing this, of course, and kept watch from the upstairs window, setting down the binoculars when anyone seemed to be looking in the direction of the house. But when there was a sudden burst of excitement out at the jetty, she raised the glasses and stepped up close to the windows in the upstairs study. The boat seemed to be in very shallow water, then she remembered it was low tide.

But from their excitement, she also realized that something else had happened.

"Sorry to inconvenience you, Miss Wilkerson," Officer Jackson said to her from the side porch. This time she didn't extend an invitation to come in. She had decided to look, instead, like an intruded-upon and slightly disinterested bystander. "But we'll need to use the parking area outside, maybe the whole side yard, if you don't mind."

"Why should I . . ." She glanced toward the marsh and beach, even though from this vantage point neither was visible.

"It's more than just a wrecked boat, ma'am," he said in an almost absurdly polite manner. "We've found a body out there underneath it. It's now become a possible crime scene."

Was he watching her eyes, her face, the way she responded? Well, how else was she to respond, but with shock? Was she supposed to let him come in, sit at the table, use the phone and the bathroom, and have her make coffee for him and his fellow police officers? Was this house supposed to be his—what? Command post?

"I'm sure Mr. Ross wouldn't mind, do you? I'm also sure you're authorized to make a decision like this, because it'd be very much appreciated. The next nearest house is—"

"I'm sure it will be fine."

He was already backing away, nodding. "Thank you. You won't even know we're here."

"Oh, yes I will," she murmured after he'd left. "More than you know."

"It's pretty gruesome," he said, coming up to her, cigarette pack in hand. He offered her one, but she shook her head. "Really mangled up woman. 'Course we'll get her blood type, DNA, that kind of thing.

Probably fell overboard. Looks like she tried to grab hold of something and claw her way back but got stuck in the lines." He looked at her face, trying to read her reaction, then said quickly: "Sorry, I guess I'm just thinking out loud. Bad habit of mine. If I said anything—"

"Everything you said will be in the paper, Officer."

"Mac. Just Mac."

"Detective Jackson."

"You're not happy about this, are you?"

"I lead a quiet life . . . Mac," she said carefully. "So, no, I'm not very happy. I'm just thankful that I . . ." She quickly searched her head for the kind of remark an average person might make. ". . . don't have children. I'd hate to subject them to this." She gave a distasteful look over her shoulder at the news truck, complete with satellite dish, which was backing down the long driveway. A police officer—under Detective Jackson's orders—had just told the local cable news team that this was private property and they'd have to park on the road, about a quarter of a mile away.

"You ever been married, Miss Wilkerson?"

"No, I . . ."

Before she could figure out how to respond to that, he said, "Must be a lonely life, living out here practically on the edge of nowhere." He glanced down suddenly; the cat was snaking its way through his legs. "Especially in the winter."

"No, I . . . prefer it that way. I'm a . . ." Quickly she found a plausible explanation: ". . . writer, too. I prefer the solitude."

"A writer? What do you write?" He bent over, picked the cat up.

He was too quick, too astute, and she was far too slow to recover and come up with an inane and typical response. It wasn't easy when every question had to be formulated and processed, then the answer sought out with such care and diligence.

"Mysteries," she said, only because it was the first thing to come into her head.

"Oh, like Mr. Ross?"

"No, he writes horror, though sometimes there's not much difference between horror and mystery, is there?"

"How's that?"

"Some mystery writing is perfectly horrible." There, at last, a reasonably glib response.

He cracked a small smile and she had the passing thought that perhaps, with a shave and a better haircut, he might not be half bad-looking.

"Well, sorry about what I said. I guess this—" He tossed his cigarette on the ground and stepped on it. "—is kind of a mystery, isn't it? And a gruesome one, too. 'Course we suspect it's an accidental death and once we pin down who she is and figure out where this boat came

from, where it was moored, and so on, we'll get some more answers. Still, what a rotten way to go."

"Drowning?" she asked, which was a mistake.

Just an hour earlier she'd been sitting on the bluff below the house, watching as the forensics team walked up and down the beach with their collection bags and instruments. Every now and then she'd seen a man or woman bend over, pick something up in a gloved hand, study it, and then either throw it away or tuck it in a plastic bag.

"Bad enough to drown, but to be tangled up under a boat." He shivered, shoving his hands down into the pockets of his jacket. "Hate just to think about it."

So it had been even harder than she imagined it would be. Packing them up one at a time and almost lovingly nestling them into the pockets that had been made for each—it was painful. Each one had its own story, its own different way of finding its way into her possession.

One had been thrust at her during a raid; she'd hid that one in her coat. Another was a gift from a grateful client. A third found its way into her possession when she'd been in an apartment searching for *merchandise* that legitimately belonged to her. She'd found the merchandise only moments before the police had arrived with a search warrant. She'd beaten the police that time.

But now she shut the case, latching it tightly. There was no way they could be found in this house, for there was no way she could explain their existence. They didn't belong to Mr. Ross. They really didn't belong to her either, and though their identification tags had long ago been removed, she was familiar with what ballistics tests could prove. Oh, she could clean off every scrap of herself possible, wipe away fingerprints, bits of skin and hair and anything else, but she could never change the identifying scrapes and lines each firearm carried in its barrel.

The cars were gone, the boat towed off. The forensics team had left as had Detective Jackson. It was past midnight and the case had lain on the kitchen table for several hours now. So, after dressing warmly and letting the cat out, she left the house, flashlight in one hand, leather case in the other.

Though neither the body of the woman nor the boat wrecked against the jetty had anything to do with her, the leather case did. And because it could never be explained, it had to be concealed. That's why she went into the marsh, crossing over the ditches on the wooden planks that had been placed there. Some of the planks had shifted in the high tide, so she paused, set the case down, and moved them back. Others were held down by rocks, and she would have to remember to put them back the way she had found them.

Finally, though, she reached the small skiff tied up at the edge of Little Salt Pond.

Later, on her way back, she met the gray cat, and scooping him up in her arms, carried him the rest of the way to the house.

Some people have things to hide, he knew, that have nothing to do with anything. A father with a secret lover. A woman who'd had a quick, unimportant affair with a college professor. An elderly woman and a small theft.

And the murder of a woman, rigged to look like an accidental death? Or was it the other way around?

He pulled into the driveway, stared up at the gray-shingled, multi-gabled house. Probably late 1800's, he mused. Built with money for someone who had money. Perhaps a retired sea captain, whaling most likely, except back then homes on the Cape were rarely built facing the water like this one. Too cold with the gales coming down out of the northeast. But that was just another mystery, and one that probably had nothing to do with anything.

Still, he wasn't certain what Melanie Wilkerson was so anxious to conceal. What was so important that she froze whenever he came near her? He knew she was more than just a naturally edgy person, unaccustomed to dealing with people, a woman who went into Westfleet only when she needed groceries.

On the surface, yes, she was the somewhat reclusive caretaker of Jonathan Ross's summer home. But according to his notes . . .

It is possible to stumble onto one mystery while trying to solve another. It had happened to him before.

The first time, a respected family man in his forties, a teacher, was suspected of stealing funds from a school account. Under questioning, the man had broken down in Mac's office and admitted to lying in an attempt to protect the guilty party. Why, Mac had asked. Because, the teacher confessed, he had had a long-standing affair with the real culprit, another man.

"Please, don't let anyone know," the man had begged. "It'll ruin my family, be the end of my career." So Mac hadn't. The investigation had proceeded without that information being revealed; besides, it had had nothing to do with the theft. It was just another secret best left that.

Then there was the woman who'd had her first child by her college professor. She'd made the same tearful confession, but at her home, as she sat nervously on the edge of a sofa. "He doesn't know. My husband thinks . . ." She'd turned her head to the sounds of children playing in the other room. ". . . they're all his. It would kill him. Please."

So Mac had booked her for stealing funds from the bank where she worked, but kept the paternity of her first child a secret. It had nothing to do with his case.

And now there was Melanie. Who wasn't Melanie. He'd asked around and found that she claimed to have been raised in the Midwest by an elderly aunt and that she had been the sole survivor of a family who had all been killed when a tornado upended their trailer home. Melanie had been the missing child, thought lost and dead, who two days later walked into a gas station some twelve miles from the scene of the storm. She had been a miracle child, and at the time, thirty-two years ago, was at the center of a story which had made headlines throughout the heartland of America.

It was an engaging story, but it was, Mac knew, a total fabrication. The story did make several major newspapers. But approximately six weeks later, those same papers would print retractions, claiming unscrupulous relatives had passed off one of their own children as the miraculously surviving Melanie. Two aunts and an uncle had gone to prison for fraud.

The real Melanie Wilkerson had never been found. The aunt who had supposedly raised her was dead twenty years now. The schools Melanie should have attended contained no record of a Melanie Wilkerson. The high school she claimed to have graduated from, the trade school from which she'd gotten a degree in graphic design, both were fictitious. So as he looked up at the house he wondered if this was another case of unveiling a secret better left covered.

For if Melanie, whoever she was, had gotten hold of those first newspaper accounts, then built an existence around that little girl—gaining a copy of her birth certificate, inventing an entire life for her—then who was she really? For two years she'd worked here as Jonathan Ross's caretaker, with a work record the author's agent had confirmed was without blemish. Melanie was utterly trustworthy, or so the man had claimed, speaking for Mr. Ross, of course.

Mac had also checked the wanted lists, the records of unsolved crimes, the profiles of wanted criminals, which were easily pulled up online from state and federal databases. Not a single one fit Melanie. So a new idea came to mind, she was simply a young woman who had walked away from a difficult life. An abusive husband or boyfriend, perhaps. But even so, checking into missing persons with the help of two fellow officers had turned up nothing. Neither was she a federal witness, tucked away on the Cape anonymously. He had connections in Federal Witness Protection, including a cousin he trusted, and had come up empty there.

Illegal immigrant was a blind alley. Prison escapee, the same. He typed her description into a dozen police search sites, came up with dozens of possibilities, but every face he blew up to compare with Melanie's wasn't a match. Even adjusting for age, a change in her hairstyle or color, or anything less than major cosmetic surgery, there was nothing. Absolutely nothing. She was an enigma, a person on the map

without a background or a past. In fact, Mac knew only one thing for sure about Melanie Wilkerson, and that was . . .

She wasn't Melanie Wilkerson.

He took notice of everything: the gray cat curled on the floor under the table; the muddy boots by the radiator; the pristine, quiet feel of the kitchen; the drip-drip of the coffee maker churning out a vanilla-flavored brew. And her, walking across the tiles, empty mug in hand as she asked, "And you, Detective, coffee?"

Her poise today was unnerving, too perfect. She walked and moved with an ease which was forced and artificial. Whatever she had done, whoever she had been in the past, involved deceit and artifice.

So, con artist. Grifter. He'd have to check into that, too.

He nodded and said, "Thank you. Black, no sugar. But as I was saying, Miss Wilkerson—"

"Melanie." Even that was offered in a strange, cool fashion. Who was this? What was she?

"Melanie, we've pretty much cleared up the situation. Boat's gone. We've identified the remains and think we know what happened. Just came by to fill you in and thank you for the use of your yard."

"My employer's yard," she said coolly. She was at the counter now, spooning two spoonfuls of sugar into her own mug.

Club hostess. Cocktail waitress. Dancer. Stripper. Professional . . .

"So," she said, "you'll not be coming back."

That was a statement, not a question, and it brought to mind the third time, which involved a theft from the Russian Orthodox church. Fourteen years ago a series of valuable woodcarvings that adorned the vestibule at St. Bartholomew's in the center of Westfleet had disappeared. There had been few leads, and none had panned out. Ultimately, with enough donations the church was able to replace the carvings—as near as they could be replaced. The years went by, the matter forgotten. Until two months ago when an elderly man, husband of a woman known for her unstinting generosity and hours of volunteer work at St. Bartholomew's, suffered an apparent heart attack. Mac had been the officer on call, arriving at the house just minutes before the paramedics. And there, in the bedroom, Officer Mac Jackson spotted the stolen carvings atop a bureau.

"I didn't know how to return them," the woman told Mac later. "He has Alzheimer's, you know, he barely knows who he is, let alone me. He brought them home, one at a time. Oh, we must have had nearly a dozen here before the church reported them missing." Her eyes, pale blue and icy clear, had seemed to look right through Mac. "I thought of speaking to the priest, or to my lawyer, or to . . . you people. But the shame. No." She shook her head defiantly. "I've left instructions about

what they are and to whom they belong in a letter that I keep in my desk."

Mac had barely known why he'd said: "I'll return them for you."

The next day he handed them over to the young, dumfounded priest, with just these words: "We found them."

Now he was easing into a kitchen chair, watching this young woman as she went through a charade: alternately interested, alternately relieved, alternately praying he'd just get up and go and forget about her.

Then he remembered one more case, but this one hadn't happened to him.

A friend, a fellow police officer across the canal in Plymouth, had pulled over a car that had just slightly crossed the center yellow line, then moved back into lane. The officer discovered a frightened, cowering woman crouched in the back seat. She was the man's girlfriend, and she had been beaten to a bloody pulp. Just instinct, his friend had later explained; it hadn't been the man's driving, not exactly. Well, Mac suggested, perhaps the man had glanced in the rearview mirror with a worried expression on his face? No, his friend had answered, he hadn't been able to see the driver's face. The whole thing happened at night.

Melanie set the mug down in front of him and for a brief instant their eyes met. She was too calm this morning, revealing not a shred of curiosity, not even in her body language, even though . . .

Even though she knew she should be.

"That's good, isn't it?" she said. "I mean, it was just an accident?"

"No, not at all." He sat back in the stiff pilot's chair.

"No?"

The cat stirred under the table and rubbed against his legs. "You know, you really ought to give this puss a name. What is he, a stray?"

"He showed up about a month ago. I found him while walking in the marsh." Too much information. She added quickly: "I meant to take him to the shelter. I worked there for a while."

"Yeah," he said, then took a sip from his mug. "I know."

"Detective Jackson, have you checked up on me? You don't suspect that I . . ."

It was the best she'd done yet; she even smiled when she said his name.

"That you bludgeoned a woman nearly to death, then tied her body under a boat, knowing pretty certain it was going to drift this way and hit the beach somewhere between here and Westfleet Harbor?"

"Is that . . ." She withdrew; this was no act. She even grew pale.

"Yeah," he said, leaning on the table toward her. "She was full of diatoms. You're a mystery writer, correct? You must know what that means?"

"No, I don't. What does it mean?"

"She was tied up, Miss Wilkerson; forensics found some strands of rope around the wrists. The torso was covered with bruises received, we think, before death. Now there are various ways to drown, and I suppose you writing in this genre would know what I mean. She inhaled a large amount of water before she died. Diatoms are microscopic organisms found in seawater. They found some in her lungs, her bloodstream, and even in her bone marrow." He paused, then went on. "Anyhow, we think she's Carla Rindini. Her husband, Michael Rindini, is our version of organized crime out here on Cape Cod. Into a little of this, a little of that, gambling and money laundering, selling guns to Northern Ireland, the whole damn panorama. Mickey Rindini is a small-time hoodlum who wants to be big time. But also he's not too smart and he's been caught a few times. He's done time. He's also the present owner of the *Solomon*. Would you like to hear about that, too?"

"I'm certain it will be in the papers."

"Probably. Eventually. But you don't subscribe to a paper, Miss Wilkerson." Another sip of coffee.

"You have checked up on me. I go into town twice a week, Detective, and I pick up a newspaper when I do. But I get most of my news online. I have a laptop upstairs, which I use to write on, and I'm connected to the Internet. I keep up with current events that way."

"That the only way you keep up on current events?" he said, scooting back in the chair a bit, supposedly so he could reach down and stroke the cat, but his eyes fell on the boots, then he looked back up at her.

"Whatever do you mean?" she said, struggling to be insulted.

"Binoculars, Miss Wilkerson. You've been watching us from the upstairs window. Curiosity? You know what they say about that—and cats." He pulled the cat out from under the table and placed it in his lap. "You were also down on the bluffs, watching the state forensics team comb the beach."

"There's no law that says I can't watch, and it was just . . . interest."

"What for? Research?"

"Research?" she demanded.

"For one of your books. Yeah, we know the name of the *Solomon's* previous owner, too. Solomon Bergman. He was a well-to-do doctor out of Newcastle, Maine. His family sold the boat to the Rindini brothers, who supposedly planned—now get this—to use it as a *tour boat* out here in the bay." He shook his head. "Some people. The swill they think we'll swallow." He smiled. "Anyhow, the boat was in dry dock in Hyanis the last six weeks, until it suddenly disappears from the boatyard. Now the boatyard owner, he's no fool; he knows who Mickey Rindini

is. Small time or not, you don't mess with Mickey. So he calls Rindini to report the boat missing before he calls the police. Rindini tells the marina guy, it's okay, we've got the boat. Moved it ourselves last night, just drove into the yard, hitched it up to a truck and took it away. Sorry we didn't tell you first. Crazy." He shook his head, awaited her reaction.

Why, she wondered, was he was telling her all this, and sitting there with the cat in his lap, petting it like they were friends from way back. Everything about him and this boat made her uneasy.

"But get this, the marina guy, he never checks, you see, to make sure he is talking to Rindini. I talked to the guy this morning and he says he called the number Rindini gave him, but no, how could he be certain it *was* Rindini?"

"I confess, Detective Jackson, the whole thing confuses me, too," she said.

"Yeah," he agreed, staring at her intently. "Join the I-Am-Confused Club. That phone number was to a public phone in a harbor-front bar. Anyhow, we know that Carla Rindini's body, or what's left of it, was tied up underneath her husband's boat. Right now we're looking for the elusive Mickey Rindini. You see, this is one theory: Mickey Rindini and his brother Ronnie owed big time to a guy you really don't mess with, out of New York City. We think Mickey was trying to make connections to this guy and his group, and in order to do so, he made a major mistake. He borrowed money from this man—we'll call him Mr. Big—to buy something big, drugs, guns, or that new pill the kids can't get enough of lately." He shrugged. "Whatever. We're not sure. But when time comes to pay back Mr. Big, Mickey comes up short. We know he and Ronnie tried to take out another loan. We've got contacts all over—Providence, Boston, even Hartford, Connecticut. They all tell us Mickey was desperate and running out of options. In this game, it's pay up, or . . . well, I'm sure you've seen your share of gangster movies, Miss Wilkerson, haven't you?"

"So you think this Mickey Rindini either killed his wife—for the insurance? Or that maybe this could have been . . ." She rose up out of the chair and walked into the living room, and looked out the bay window toward the marsh and the distant beach.

"Could have been?" he prompted, following her.

"This man from New York City—is he teaching Mickey a lesson?" But it didn't feel right and she knew why.

"A hit? Maybe. That's another possibility. Mickey might have offered the *Solomon* to Mr. Big in lieu of what he owed him. Maybe this was his response to that offer. A kind of thanks, but no thanks." He shrugged, stroked the cat, but his eyes were on her. "It was a nice boat, though. Needed a new paint job, a little inte-

rior work. Fixed up, might have gone for as high as a couple hundred grand."

"I've come so far," she whispered, "and it's still here."

"Miss Wilkerson?"

She spun around on him. "You haven't contacted him? This Michael Rindini?"

"No. His office claims he's out of the country on a business trip with his brother. We expect to get in touch some time today."

"Then it's only speculation on your part, isn't it? Maybe his wife is alive and well somewhere. Maybe the woman you found is someone else. Maybe she . . . maybe it *was* an accident. Maybe she fell overboard and got tangled in her own lines. Maybe—"

"Maybe Michael and Carla Rindini faked the whole thing. Maybe they found some girl who looked just like Carla Rindini. Maybe this is insurance fraud."

"There are too many maybes, Detective Jackson."

"Here's another: Mickey had a huge insurance policy on his wife. Maybe he found a way to get rid of his wife and pay off his debts."

"You don't know that. You're just guessing."

"That's police work for you, Melanie; sometimes it's just a lot of guesswork, kind of like science, I'd imagine. You guess and then you research, and then you find evidence to back up your guess, yes or no. If it's no you move on to something else, wherever the evidence seems to lead. Eventually, if you're lucky and skilled enough and the people you're hunting down are stupid enough to make a mistake, you get your answer."

"That's your summation of what police work is supposed to be?" she asked, horrified.

He shrugged. "Sometimes the evidence isn't there, Melanie. Sometimes it all gets washed overboard."

"So what do you do now? Ask around? Look for this . . . Mickey and his brother? Talk to everyone you can possibly find who knew, or knows them? And the boat? Do you scrape it down for every possible clue? Fingerprints and what . . . fibers? And matchbooks with mysterious words written on them?"

"Don't get so excited. You don't even know these people, do you?"

"Of course I don't." She backed away from him. "But you can't fault me for being interested. Just interested. It happened on my beach! I'm surprised Jonathan—that is, Mr. Ross—hasn't flown in here so he can learn all the gory details himself first hand! I'm sorry that . . ."

He was so close then, so near to asking her, "Who are you, really, Melanie Wilkerson?" but he couldn't, and he wouldn't do it. Sometimes something has nothing to do with anything. Her secret, and why the *Solomon* had wrecked up against the jetty outside, maybe they were

two parallel secrets, not intersecting at any point he could discern. That is, not yet.

"Sorry that?" he asked.

"That you obviously think I have some part to play in this. But I don't. I'm just a curious woman who deep down wants nothing more than to be left alone."

"You're curious and you want to be left alone."

"Yes. Perhaps you can't reconcile the two, but I can. Now I have work to do."

"Of course. Just thought I'd fill you in." He let the cat drop onto the floor, stood up, and after thanking her for the coffee said, "But you really ought to give that puss a name."

"The Jacksons go way back in this town. Settled the whole area, married into most of the old seafaring families, the whaling families, the fishing families. Mac Jackson is probably related to a good half the town, and the other half, one of his six sisters is through *her* husband."

"Six sisters," Melanie murmured. She'd known who to come to, the friendly and gossip-hungry proprietor of the local convenience store. More than once, while waiting in line to pay for groceries, Melanie had overheard the woman gossiping about someone or something. In the past she'd barely paid attention. Today was different.

All the same, she hadn't wanted to draw attention to herself, so it helped that the woman had known Melanie since she'd first taken the job as Jonathan Ross's caretaker. That in itself had given Melanie a kind of semi-celebrity status. Melanie had even done the woman a favor earlier: finagling for her an autographed copy of Jonathan Ross's latest novel, *The Dead Know No Secrets*.

So when Melanie casually asked, while paying for three bags of groceries, if the woman knew or had heard of a Detective Mac Jackson, the woman was more than willing to oblige.

"Oh, yes, big family. But Mac—his real name is Douglas MacArthur Jackson, incidentally. Never married, that is—" The woman leaned over the counter toward Melanie, gave her a conspiratorial wink. "—not yet."

"That's not why I'm interested, Magda," Melanie insisted, using the name pinned to the woman's uniform.

"So, why are you interested?" the woman asked, withdrawing a bit. "Mac pull you over, write you a speeding ticket?"

"He's investigating the boat that got stuck out on North Shore Jetty," Melanie replied. "The one with the body tied underneath it."

Magda withdrew even further, then said with a kind of awed sigh, "It's just like a Jonathan Ross novel, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," she said.

So sometimes you do find something—like the case wrapped in plastic and tied to the bottom of one of the cement pilings in the Old Salt Pond.

“Woman walking a dog saw it sticking out at low tide.”

“How many are there?” Mac asked.

“Eight. An odd assortment, Mac. There were three Colts, including two from the Model M series, rare collector’s items, one’s gold plated. That’s worth some dollars, for sure. The other Model M has factory markings that indicate it was made for the NYPD. There were also two Rugers, a Glock, and a Kimber—a Gold Combat II model, expensive. Oh, and a 9 millimeter Beretta. And get a load of this.” The police sergeant tapped the evidence form. “Looks like one of the Rugers might be a match for a gun used to kill a guy called Jimmy the Greek, a small-time crook, found dead on a back lot in Hollywood three years ago. Into drugs, prostitution, gambling. LAPD has requested the stats on the gun; I’m sending them out online.”

“Jimmy the Greek.”

“Yeah, probably double-crossed some bigger, more powerful crook. I got it all saved on disk if you want to read it later.”

But his attention wasn’t on the details of a crime that had happened three years ago and a thousand miles away, not just yet. He looked down at a photograph of the case. The case had been carefully wrapped in plastic and duct tape. Its owner hadn’t wanted to risk all that expensive leather to sea water. “Locals didn’t do this,” Mac said. The young police sergeant looked at him, confused. “Little Salt Pond is cut off from the bay except at extreme high tide, which is at full moon. That’s when the water comes over the marsh. Then at the opposite, extreme low tide, the pilings are exposed. We’ve just had a full moon, so any footprints . . .”

“None. If there were some, they’re gone,” the younger man said.

“A boat? A dinghy or skiff . . .”

“Just one, belongs to some local kids, but we checked it all over, Mac. Might have been moved a few times since.” The man shrugged. “So, nothing.” Then he asked: “You think this has got something to do with the dead woman and the boat?”

“Little Salt Pond is less than half a mile from Old North Jetty,” Mac said, letting the younger man divine any significance from that.

“So what do we do now? We’ve gone over all these.” The sergeant tapped the firearms list, complete with photographs beside each description. “And the case, too, inside and out. Not a single print. No fibers, not even dust. We’ve tried to trace the case. It’s high-grade calfskin, whole thing hand stitched. There’s just this.” The younger man handed him a slip of paper. “It’s from the lab. Other than that . . .” He shrugged. “Not even a name or signature on the case. Any one of a thousand leather crafters could have made this thing.”

"And I can assume you are researching those thousand leather crafters?" he asked as he studied the sparse information on the crime lab's report.

"Yes, sir," the younger man said with a sigh. "They're all over the Net. I'm scanning every damn picture I can into a database, hoping to find something similar."

"Someone meant to hide this, go back for it later," Mac said. "So we put the case back, empty . . . and wait."

"Any progress, Detective?" Melanie asked. She knew the only reason he'd come out to the house on a rainy and miserable afternoon would be—well, either to share any new information he had, or to arrest her. But he had come alone and in his own car, a musty brown Chevy Camaro, so she figured it had to be to fill her in on the latest developments in the case.

"They're the hardest to sort out, professional jobs," he said to her. "The motive is fixed somewhere else, so it becomes a very impersonal, matter-of-fact thing for the ones who do it. Like taking your car to the car wash." He shrugged. "Part of everyday life. No regrets. No explanations. Just—" He tossed his cigarette down in the driveway, stepped on it. "—business."

"Now you sound like you've seen too many gangster movies."

"That's funny."

"What is?"

"That you remember me mentioning that. I was out here last—a week ago." He studied her face, watched as a dozen different emotions tracked across it. "You remember everything I say to you, Melanie?"

She couldn't think of a response.

"Kind of makes me edgy, you know. Means you're keeping careful track of everything I say or do. Magda Evans, at the convenience store? She's my sister Kim's mother-in-law."

"She warned me." She was surprised, but she managed to smile at that. "Told me you were kin to half the town."

"Magda thought it was funny. You don't say two words every time you go in and out of that store. But four days ago, you and Magda had a regular conversation."

"Well, then, Detective Jackson, I admit to embarrassment. Nothing like this has happened to me, even from a distance. I mean, a murder, a death, whatever it was, so I'm curious, that's all. Living vicariously, you might call it."

"Is that so?"

"You don't believe me?"

"Curious about the woman who died out there under a boat, no, that's perfectly normal. But curious about me? That's a little different now, isn't it?"

"I was hoping Magda would know something that you hadn't told me."

"I don't share my work with my sisters, Miss Wilkerson, or their in-laws."

"I didn't know that," she responded nervously. "I'm sure some police officers do."

"Excuse me for the teenage slang, but that's lame, and you know it."

"Look, I might work for a famous and celebrated writer, but my life is very . . . uncelebrated. I was curious, and I thought maybe somehow this might work itself into a story."

"Even lamer."

"Then why do you think . . ."

"You were asking about me? I think . . ." Was this the time, the moment? It could lead nowhere, just prove to be an unnecessary intrusion into a private individual's life. And that was something he had always avoided, even if it was sometimes at the cost of truth, or justice, or the law. Police officer or not, without good cause he had no right to probe into anyone's personal life.

"I think, Melanie, you're hiding something." But then again, he had proven himself to be not only honest and direct, but discreet. Odd though, that his was a reputation built on relationships formed one at a time; it was not something that could ever be made public.

"And what is that?" Her response was perfect, her face, her eyes, even the way she shifted her body nervously. Like the teacher with the secret lover. The old woman whose husband had stolen the church artifacts. The woman whose oldest child was not her husband's.

Or was it like the driver with the battered girlfriend crouching in the back seat? Because if it was happening again, he found himself wishing it wouldn't. And yet, like the good policeman he was, he'd have to find out which it was.

"I don't know," he replied. "You're hiding it from me."

"I don't know what happened to that woman, or her husband, or why the *Solomon* was beached here. I wish I did. I wish I could help you, and if I . . . seem to be too interested, or not interested enough, it's just the way I am. I've always been this way."

"And what way is that?"

"I don't have a lot of . . . people skills." Suddenly it was so much easier being truthful, not having to be constantly on guard. "What I'm trying to say is that I never know what to say, or how to react, or how to be natural, unless—well, I guess I'm like an actress, or I was."

"An actress." There. That was one he hadn't considered.

"Yes. I can act a certain part if I have to. I can pretend to be your friend and I can lead you on and . . ." She realized suddenly whom she was speaking to and quickly said, "But I'm not acting now. This is the real me. I don't have many friends, Detective. I'm really shy; I really

am. I took this job out here away from people, so I . . . I wouldn't have to . . ."

"To pretend anymore?"

"Yes. So there, how do you like that for a confession? You've done more for me in ten minutes than my analyst could do in ten years."

"There's a salt pond not far from here. It's part of a harbor that got buried in a hurricane eighty years ago. Some of the pilings from the docks are still there. Someone took a skiff belonging to one of the local kids, paddled out to the pilings, and tied a briefcase to one of them. Then they dropped the case in. It was wrapped in plastic and weighted down with a few rocks." There, that was enough information. He watched her carefully as he asked: "And do you know what we found in that briefcase?"

Her face was frozen. He had loosened her up. She had started to trust him, and then, no longer on her guard, betrayed herself. Well, it had worked with the others: the man with the lover, the woman who'd had the affair, the wife of the old man who'd stolen from the church. Why not her? Easier than watching a salt pond for days on end, and definitely cheaper than paying overtime.

"Nothing. It was empty." He kept watching her eyes.

Again she betrayed herself: her eyes dropped, then came back up again. There was surprise written all over her face.

"Empty?" she whispered.

"Yeah, hell of a thing." He half shrugged. "Might have something to do with this murder, might not. But if you hear or see anyone out on the marsh, give us a call, okay?"

"Okay."

Empty. She felt ill, lost. From the moment she had left the house, case in hand, trudged across the marsh—so careful to walk where it was wet, where the tides would come in later and destroy her footprints—she had felt sick about the entire thing. Getting rid of them had made her feel helpless, as though putting them into the pond had rendered her into this pathetic, weak, defenseless being. She had needed a drink on returning home, just as she needed one now.

Oh, there was Mr. Ross's sad little bone-handled derringer, kept in the night stand beside his bed. But that didn't hold more than two bullets, and as far as she knew, it was empty. Never—not in the last fourteen years—had she been without something for protection.

And now the police had her case, and the case was empty! Had the local kids . . .

No, she'd never seen the local kids go near the pond, or near that old, tired skiff at this time of year! So someone else . . .

Had he been watching her? And had Detective Douglas MacArthur Jackson been playing a cruel trick on her? Did he suspect her . . . ?

She looked down at the cat, half coiled on her feet, then across the kitchen floor where her boots, still caked with mud from several nights ago, sat near the radiator. Immediately she got up, grabbed the boots, and then, in the kitchen sink, scrubbed them clean with soap and water.

"I'm very busy, Detective," she said as she went around the car, an expensive Lexus SUV owned by Mr. Ross but left there for her personal use during the months he was away. "Really, I don't know what else I can possibly tell—"

"You know anything about the Bible, Miss Wilkerson?" he asked, interrupting her speech, and her thoughts.

"The Bible?" It was enough to make her pause and, squinting through the bright morning sun, confront him.

"*Solomon's Song*. That was the boat's full name. Its last owner, before the Rindinis, was a Dr. Solomon Bergman." He gave a shrug. "According to his heirs, the name had some significance to him. When his wife died, he was planning to keep the boat and change its name. But he sold it instead and died shortly thereafter. The Song of Solomon is one long love poem. It's in the Old Testament. You ever hear of it?"

"No."

"Can we go inside?"

What now? Should she be indignant, demand to know why he was so insistent—and persistent—in his treatment of her? Demand to know if she was a suspect? Or did she continue the charade?

Yesterday, he had been excited about something. Oh, how she knew that type of subtle, restrained excitement—and it had to do with her! But God! How did she convince him—now!—that she and this boat and this dead woman were two dramatically different situations? Would it come down to this: in order to prove her innocence of one crime, she would have to admit to another?

Or worse yet, an entire *series* of other crimes?

"I wasn't being entirely truthful the last time I saw you," he began as they went into the kitchen. There for the first time he took off his jacket.

"You weren't?"

"No. The case we found in the salt pond wasn't empty."

She couldn't hide it, the look of relief—then realization—on her face. She couldn't control it either. Even if he had found the guns, she'd never have them back. Stolen by local kids, or taken by the police, they were irretrievably lost to her forever. So in an instant, she saw why he had done this.

"They're yours, aren't they, Melanie?" He gave her no time to react, or to reply. "Don't even deny it. See this?" He took a small glassine envelope from his side pocket, threw it on the table. She stepped forward,

looked at it, moved a hand forward, but then drew back. "You were so careful, weren't you?" he said. "But old Mister No Name, he betrayed you." He glanced down at the cat. "There's nothing you can come up with that will explain why the cat hairs we found in the briefcase and your cat's fur are a perfect match. I carried home No Name's hairs, Melanie. They were all over my coat."

"You've got a pretty good forensics team."

"The best." Then he shrugged. "State helps, too."

"What do you want from me?" It was then that she felt utterly helpless, a sensation she'd been running from for most of her life.

"I think, Melanie . . ." He slapped his notepad down on the table, looked around the kitchen. "I want a cup of that vanilla brew, and then, I want some answers. Mr. Ross keep a Bible in his library?"

"I'll go look."

She could have gone then and got Jonathan Ross's derringer. Maybe it was loaded. Maybe she could find the bullets for it. But what then? Shoot a cop in the back, and after that, what?

It was too late for that. The only choice was this . . .

"Song of Solomon. What were those registration numbers?" She sat down next to him at the table and opened the King James Version Bible that she had found.

His eyes met hers, then he said: "An eight, a six, a seven. The last three numbers; the rest were all scraped off."

"But what could they have been thinking?" she asked softly, opening the Bible.

"You can never tell what anyone is thinking," he said. "You can only tell what a person does."

"So you do think . . . she was deliberately . . . and the boat . . ." Melanie leaned forward, folding her arms on the table, studying him. The cat—that damned cat which had given her away—jumped onto the table. She tried to push him off, succeeded only in pushing him down the table, where he remained, perched like royalty.

"You should have done a little more investigating," was his answer to that. "Who owned this house—the closest house to Old North Jetty—before Mr. Ross?"

"I don't . . ." But she did. "A local family, the Ryders. When I was first here, they gave me a hard time. They felt they'd been wronged because the government took it from them for failure to pay taxes."

"That's right," he agreed. "The government auctioned it off; a local real estate company picked it up, and when they couldn't get a buyer right away, rented it for one summer. Do you want to know to whom?" But before she could respond, he said, "I contacted Jonathan Ross this morning, and he's given permission for a search of this house. He said that anything belonging to the previous owners had

been removed or thrown away, but he understood why we needed to go over it again." Now he watched her—nothing, no reaction. "We'll be doing a search in the morning."

"Which gives me time to . . ." She shook her head, studied him. "You know those guns are mine. You know I tried to hide them because I feared this. But not because you might be suspicious of Jonathan or the previous owners of this house and search it, but because . . ."

"I might be suspicious of you?"

"You said you needed my help, Mac, but not to look up passages in a Bible. You could have done that at the local library."

"The people who rented this house—three summers ago—were a Mr. and Mrs. Michael Rindini. The dead woman has been positively identified; it is Carla Rindini. The news hit the papers this morning and just two hours ago the real estate agent who handled the house's rental called me."

"So . . ." For the first time self-protection was taking a back seat, something she never thought possible. "So, was Carla Rindini murdered, then dumped out there—under the boat where her husband would find her? Was it a hit?"

"It's very possible. Mickey Rindini might have killed her himself, though he claims to have been out of town at the time. He says his wife had a boyfriend, a guy with a violent past, says maybe they took the boat out. So we're looking for Mr. Violent Boyfriend right now, but with nothing on the husband . . ." He shrugged.

She leaned forward again, touched the open Bible under his hand. "So what has this—" She looked down to where he had opened it to the first page of Song of Solomon. "—got to do with it?"

"Maybe nothing. I told you how Mickey Rindini might want us to see things: blame the boyfriend. But here's another possibility: whoever killed Carla Rindini thought this was their house—Carla and Mickey's house. Mickey liked to act and look the big shot; he rented fancy cars, passed them off as his. He lied about owning property all over the Cape. If he made someone think this was his place . . ." He shrugged. "But if so, then that someone was definitely from out of town, probably off-Cape even. Everyone around here knows that Jonathan Ross, the writer, owns this house now."

"Yes, you and I do, and Magda Evans, and probably a good portion of the lower Cape, but what about someone from . . . somewhere else? Look at it this way, Mac, we both know Stephen King lives in Bangor, Maine. But do you know *his* street address? Which house is his?"

"No, and I read the guy," he said, still watching her.

Too closely, that she knew, waiting for a slip-up. But still she went on: "So, if someone is mad at Mr. Rindini, upset over a botched drug deal or because Mickey owes them money, they go after his wife?" She shrugged, shook her head. "No, it doesn't figure. Contract killers are

usually not hired to off an enemy's spouse, or child—maybe a friend, maybe an associate, but family . . ." She looked up at him, realizing how naturally she had lapsed into that other. "That is, from what I've seen . . . from gangster movies."

"Or what you know from experience?" His turn to lean in over the table in her direction. "Do you know how many times you've betrayed yourself? Couple of days ago you said ten minutes with me was worth ten years with your analyst. You got an analyst, Melanie? Out here on Cape Cod we might call them shrinks, or therapists, but analyst? That's West Coast talk, or New York City. Then just now you mentioned a 'botched drug deal,' and why is that? I told you the Rindinis were into money laundering, gunrunning, and illegal prescription drugs, but you assumed drugs. Why is that?"

"Are you more interested in figuring me out, or catching Carla Rindini's killer?"

"Melanie, you're not who you say you are," he said, withdrawing.

"You've really gone into my past, Detective Jackson," she said sarcastically. "Anything else you'd like to tell me?"

"Yeah, among those guns you tried to hide was one used in a murder out in L.A. three years ago. Another might be linked to some drug-gang hits, also on the West Coast. We're running checks on all the others. Two are real specialty numbers, collector's items. Another is Italian, custom-made. Getting into foreign records is difficult, but not impossible. You may have a lot of explaining to do."

"Those guns were gifts, Detective."

"You ever kill anyone, Melanie? Or can I call you Mel?"

"I won't lie about that either. The answer is no, but I have been . . ." She didn't finish.

"So? Just gifts? Funny gift to give a lady."

"Not in my particular line of work," she said, knowing that everything she'd said could scuttle her life as easily as the jetty had scuttled the *Solomon's Song*.

"Is there anyone looking for you, Melanie?"

"Police? No. Other people? No again. They all think I'm dead."

He remembered the woman sobbing on the sofa. No, Melanie's eyes didn't resemble hers in the least. The teacher? No, that man had been on the verge of tears himself. Then what about the old woman, sitting so proudly by her husband's deathbed, refusing to make excuses? Yes, her eyes had been two steel marbles, daring Mac to expose her. Melanie's eyes were just like that old woman's.

"Is it important that these *other* people continue to think of you as . . . dead?"

"Of course," she said, "if I want to go on living."

"You were in drug trafficking."

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"What did you do?"

"I greased the wheels. I made people comfortable. I was friendly and nonthreatening and . . . you might say I expanded my employer's client base."

"You solicited customers—for drugs?" He was too fascinated.

But she couldn't lie to him. It was too much of a relief to admit: "Yes. I told you, I acted, and when I did I . . . I lost my shyness. They say a lot of . . ." She forced a smile. ". . . well, professional actors are actually very shy, but when they get on the stage . . ." Her eyes met his.

"I want you to do something for me, Melanie."

So this is what I do, she thought, and do so very well . . .

I put on a performance that could and did deceive even the sharpest, shrewdest customer. I was the connection between the upper-crust, affluent, and privileged and the dingy, dirty, dregged-out world of the drug supplier. I moved in and out of both worlds like a chameleon, courting the rich while plying the powerful. I rented galleries, museums, entire amusement parks to wine and dine and seduce those who were both the most vulnerable and potentially most lucrative clients. I reassured them; I soothed them; and I steered them straight into hell.

And I was paid handsomely for it, until finally, I was able to secure my own niche in the upper echelons of the vast syndicates that control the movement of drugs into the United States from Mexico, South America, and even the Persian Gulf. I had so many contacts, knew so many names, and was privy to so many secrets, that in the end my name found its way onto at least a dozen hit lists worldwide.

So I disappeared, and did it so perfectly that only one other soul in the whole world knows the truth about me. So far he's kept quiet, but can I trust another?

As she stood there, waiting for the small party from New York to arrive—this important man with his *protection*—she wondered, could she trust another cop?

"I don't want to know any more," he had said to her four days ago. "Only you and me know about Mr. No Name, and I can get rid of an envelope of cat fur easy enough. All I want is Carla Rindini's killer. You help deliver him—or them—to me and that briefcase of guns goes into the vault."

"Except the one you've already linked to Jimmy the Greek's murder."

"Except for that one," he agreed. "Look, I can't make a one hundred percent guarantee here. The FBI might come snooping around; they might look over the salt pond and drain the damn thing, for all I know. But the cat fur is history."

She looked down at the cat where it was nestled on his feet under the table.

He shook his head, "That is, unless the cat becomes history first. In fact," then reached down to lift the animal into his lap. "Maybe I'll take Mr. No Name home, just for his own protection."

"I'd never hurt an animal," she told him.

"Funny. I think I believe you." Funny, too, he said that, when suspicion was so second nature to him.

When the black sedan eased into Jonathan Ross's driveway, she wondered if, in all of the author's gory imagination, he could ever envision anything quite so surreal as this: that his ordinary, unassuming, almost to the point of socially phobic caretaker would be entertaining such prestigious guests?

This man from New York City—Mac had christened him Mr. Big—was so powerful, so rich, so involved in the business, that seeing him was, for Melanie, like going home. Yes, Mickey Rindini owed him money, Mr. Big told her, but who was she? And what was so important he had to come out here like this? What was this about a hit on Rindini's wife? Did she know who he was?

Of course, this was all after they had come in with their electronic devices. Big's men had scanned the walls and floors and ceilings—and for one breathless moment she wondered what she would do if they *did* pick something up? Suppose Jonathan Ross (because he was a little eccentric) had installed something to keep an eye on her? But there was nothing there, and when they patted her down, the bigger of the pair, with a vicious leer to his eye, found nothing on her either.

So she had maintained her poise, for this was something she knew how to do. And so, summoning up the past she had so long eschewed and run from, she'd draped it over her shoulders like a comforting cloak. Or was it a shroud?

Because she was so perfect, so flawlessly perfect. Her hair was slicked back, her makeup glossy but not overdone. Slim, tall, elegant, she had honed this part of that false persona until it glistened.

So yes, she had explained to the refined and equally elegant and very powerful Mr. Big (He'd flown from New York to Hyannis on a private jet!) that it did look that way. Mickey Rindini had killed his wife, put her under his boat, and wrecked it on the jetty outside, all to make it look like he—this fine and respected businessman—had put out a contract on his wife. It had been a convenient way to get rid of a wife—and turn the blame on Big himself.

"But who'd believe it?" Of course Mr. Big was outraged. "On a man's wife? And for owing a lousy two hundred grand? What kind of monster do I look like?" Then he had added, as she knew he would: "Now his brother, his best friend, maybe even his dog, but a man's wife? Is there no decency in the world anymore?"

"Mickey talks too much," she had told him. "That's always been his problem."

"Then Mickey and me, I think *we* need to talk," Mr. Big had said, needing no more explanation as to just who she was. A jilted girlfriend, that was enough. Women did things for love or money, never power. She knew that was the popular misconception among men like him, and among the men for whom she had worked for so many years.

"Just teach Mickey a lesson," she'd asked. And again, she knew he would.

"Mickey Rindini came running to us yesterday, begging for protection, begging to make a deal, any deal, with anyone. Just a small-time hood in over his head. Over-ambitious and over-estimating his own abilities. It's always the way, the ones taken out are the ones who think they were smarter than anyone else."

"You can never know what a person thinks, Detective," she reminded him. "Just what they do."

"Look, Mr. Big might figure out he's been used. If so, he'll come looking for you. So we set up a burglary for the Ross house: some nut case breaks in, lives here for a few days, pretending to be Ross's girlfriend. We set up the whole scenario so when Big comes snooping around, there'll be police reports, everything. Big'll figure he got taken for a ride, just like Mr. Ross did. We even got a weekly tabloid coming out to do interviews. Famous writer stalked, stalker breaks into his house, you know, the usual spiel."

"And where was Melanie Wilkerson when all this was happening?"

"Skipping out to Bermuda. We got that end set up, too. I hope Mr. Ross keeps you on when he learns you took off on vacation when you should have been housesitting."

"And that explained your need to search Mr. Ross's house? Is that what you told him?"

"I never contacted Mr. Ross. I lied to you about that."

It was the only time she really wanted to reach out and hit him, but she restrained herself.

"And did Mickey Rindini own up to killing his wife?"

"Claims they had a fight. She was drunk. He pushed her overboard, then when he tried to get her, she got tangled up and was dragged under. He panics, comes up with the idea to wreck the boat on Old North Jetty. So maybe he's telling the truth, except she was beat up pretty bad. He also took a long time to drown. Just his bad luck that the very scenario he set up could also be mistaken for a professional hit."

"Deception piled upon deception. You created the impression of a bigger crime to flush out a smaller one? You scared Mickey into telling the truth."

"Beating a woman and tying her under a boat is no small crime."

"You know . . ." She turned away, digging her hands deeper into the pockets of her coat. It was too thin for this cold Cape weather. Living here two years and she still hadn't bought a warm coat. "There were no bugs in that house, no wires on me, nothing. Mr. Big could have killed me just as easily as—" She looked at Mac. "—Mickey Rindini killed his wife."

"No guarantees, Melanie, I told you."

"So that's what it's like to work for you, Detective Douglas MacArthur Jackson? No guarantees? I do you this tremendous favor—and risk my life doing it—and that's all you can say, no guarantees?"

"Big never carries. His two bodyguards didn't bring guns into Massachusetts; they can't risk our stiff gun laws. He's a very careful man, our Mr. Big, so his men had to pick up guns on the Cape from a dealer who owes us a favor or two. We made sure the firearms they got were rigged so they couldn't be fired. Oh, they looked fine, and Big'll probably never know. His men ditched them before they got back to New York."

"They could have strangled me. Thrown me off the jetty. Cut my throat."

"If you were what you say you were, I think you could have held them off long enough for me to get there."

"Where were you?"

"That's my secret, now isn't it?"

"You know," she said defiantly, "I read that whole section in the Bible. Except for having the same name as the boat, it had nothing to do with this."

"Are you sure?"

"I read the whole thing!"

"Dr. Solomon Bergman left those numbers on the boat, Melanie."

She frowned. Where was he going with this?

"He really loved his wife, his children said. He scraped off all but the last three numbers, then put a bullet to his head." He shrugged, turned away; they'd come a long way up the beach in the cold. The jetty was ahead, surf slapping over the rocks.

"What has that got to do . . . just tell me where you were." She hurried after him. "That is, if I needed your help, which I didn't."

Yes, where had he been? Outside in the marsh? Or somewhere in the house? The day Mr. Big and his two bodyguards arrived, she had gone out earlier, taken the Lexus to Truro to buy makeup, some hair gel, and a pair of black leather high heels. So Mac would have had time to . . .

It didn't mean anything—if he had been in the house.

But later, when she reread the Song of Solomon, she realized she

was wrong. If Mac had been in the house with her, it probably had something to do with everything.

Set me a seal upon thine heart,
 as a seal upon thine arm
 for love *is* strong as death,
 jealousy *is* cruel as the grave:
 the coals thereof *are* coals of fire,
 which *hath* a most vehement flame.
 Many waters cannot quench love,
 neither can the floods drown it:
 if a man would give all the substance
 of his house for love,
 it would utterly be contemned.

—*Song of Solomon, Chapter 8, Verses 6, 7*

SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY “UNSOLVED”:

The hotel thief, whose wife was named Elaine, was using the name Dan Lange and was staying in room 25 on the third floor of the hotel. He was posing as a dentist from Utah.

FLOOR	ROOM	HUSBAND	WIFE	PROFESSION	STATE
12	26	Earl Pilcher	Clara	plumber	Arizona
11	21	Hank Norris	Gerta	ophthalmologist	Virginia
9	29	Cecil Jergens	Bertha	electrician	S. Dakota
8	22	Alvin Keller	Freda	doctor	New York
7	28	Fred O'Hara	Helene	architect	Texas
5	24	Bert Immel	Debbie	contractor	Wyoming
4	30	Gus Moore	Alice	journalist	Tennessee
3	25	Dan Lange	Elaine	dentist	Utah

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the April issue.

The five alums gathered around a corner table at the Campus Inn, just like old times, except they were now middle aged. They had been a close knit group in college, though each had graduated at the end of a different semester. Subsequently, they had all been successful in business. Over coffee, they now exchanged news about marriages, children, and careers.

Then Cathy brought up the reason for their coming. "So, old Professor Bartholomew Smart is finally retiring. I thought he'd go on forever."

"He was a legend in the Economics Department," Daniel declared.

"He certainly was," agreed Angela. "I guess all his old students owe him a debt of gratitude."

"Conscientious, too," added Bertha. "With his knowledge of economics and business he could have been a millionaire, but he plodded along all his life on a professor's salary. His *Smart's Business Ethics* must not bring in much royalty."

Edward glanced at his watch. "Almost eight o'clock, gang," he announced. "Time for the meeting with old Bart Smart. I wonder what he wants?"

The elderly professor invited his old students into his cramped office and waited until all five were seated. He took time to polish his glasses before speaking.

"This is quite unpleasant for me," he said, "especially since you were my favorite students. Nevertheless, I have a moral obligation to society. I thought I had instilled honesty into each of you. Now, however, I have received proof that one of you amassed a fortune by insider trading. It behooves me, therefore, to disclose the identity to the proper authorities after my retirement dinner tomorrow night."

"Who is it?" one of the women asked.

"Unfortunately for Collett College, it is the biggest contributor to our scholarship fund. I will say no more at this time."

As they filed out, Angela said to Daniel, "I can't believe he means one of us."

1. The five alums contributed \$8,000, \$12,000, \$16,000, \$20,000, and \$24,000 to the scholarship fund. Cathy gave \$4,000 less than Angela. The one whose last name is Malone gave twice as much as Daniel. Mrs. Lander contributed half as much as the one who graduated in June 1962.
2. The five graduated in January 1962, June 1962, June 1963, January 1964, and June 1964. Edward and the one who gave \$16,000 graduated in the calendar year 1962. The one whose last name is Newman and the one who gave \$12,000 graduated in the calendar year 1964.
3. Each alum has a different number of children, ranging from one to five. The one whose last name is O'Dell (who didn't graduate in 1963) does not have four children, and the one whose last name is Kilmer does not have two.
4. Angela has more children than Bertha but not as many as Edward.
5. The alum who gave \$12,000 has more children than the one who gave \$8,000.
6. Bertha (who did not give the \$16,000) did not graduate in 1964. Cathy did not graduate in 1962.
7. The one who graduated in January 1962 has fewer children than the January 1965 graduate but more than the June 1964 graduate.

The Collett College gymnasium had been converted into a banquet hall for the dinner honoring Professor Smart. As they seated themselves, Angela, Bertha, Cathy, Daniel, and Edward eyed one another suspiciously. One of them was guilty of unethical transactions and would soon be exposed.

Everyone waited nervously for the arrival of the guest of honor. Minutes passed. More minutes . . . Then a student waiter rushed in, breathlessly exclaiming, "He's been murdered! Professor Smart was stabbed in the men's locker room. Blood everywhere! Somebody, please call the police!"

*Who was the dishonest alum who stabbed
honest old Professor Smart?*

See page 107 for the solution to the February puzzle.

FICTION

BRINGING IN BLOSSOMS

Dan Crawford



Illustration by Tim Foley

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 3/03

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“Your Excellency! The Ring and Whistle has never had any trouble with the law!”

“A record to be proud of indeed; may His Imperial Majesty grant that it remain unblemished. And the easiest way to achieve that, my man, is to leave me to my business.”

The fat innkeeper bowed and backed away, and the tall figure next to him entered the common room. There had never been any doubt that he would be allowed to enter, of course. An agent of the Imperial Constable had legal entree to any chamber in any building in Keastone. The patrons of the Ring and Whistle hunched over their drinks, none too pleased at the intrusion, but too wise to excuse themselves from the place now. The inspector might be looking for someone else, but to attract his attention might convince him to settle for the person nearest to hand.

“Well, Kamfra,” said the tall man, stooping by one bench, “those two horses still in the proper stables, are they?”

“Why, er, yes, Excellency.” The man swallowed and offered a brief smile. “My sainted father and mother, to think of Your Excellency remembering a little thing like that!”

“Think of it.” The man moved on, and set a hand on a thick shoulder. “Anorlick! All those hogs get back into the right pens?”

“Oh, of course, Your Excellency.” The broad, thick face was pale. “Once you explained it all,

everything was simple enough. It's all due to you.”

“I know.”

Appertan watched the gaunt agent work through the room, stopping here and there to bestow a greeting that was returned as cheerfully as if it were an ancient debt being repaid. Crossing his ankles a bit, he leaned back in his place until his shoulders touched the wall behind him. He made no attempt to hide his face or reach for the knife in his boot. As a foreigner, he had no chance whatsoever to avoid interrogation; it would be a waste of valuable energy to try.

The chief constable's agent at length pulled himself up before Appertan's table. He was not precisely frowning, but the sudden absence of the unpleasant smile made the face more grim than Appertan had expected.

“You're not from around here.”

Appertan uncrossed his ankles but did not sit up. “True, Excellency. I've come in from Mindoluin.”

His attitude was careless, but his voice held nothing but respect. A line or two softened in the gallow's expression of the inspector.

“What's your business?”

“Usual.” Appertan nodded toward the glossy bar that ran the length of the common room. “Nothing like this at home. I've come to study all the glories of the Old Empire, spend some money, and take a few stories back to shock m'mother and sisters.” He took up his mug and raised it in the direction of the barmaid with

the black velvet choker. "And see if it's true what the poets write of Keastonian women."

The inspector did not reply at once; Appertan was aware of the eyes burning along his body. There was contempt in those eyes, but that was not the whole of their expression. Suspicion was there as well. But Keastone, a land where peace had resulted in the preservation of many ancient buildings and customs, was a magnet for young men wealthy enough to travel with no better purpose than sightseeing. And the Imperial Treasury was ultimately the beneficiary of such expensive habits.

"Very well." The inspector reached down to knock the knuckles of one fist on the table; Appertan was unfamiliar with the gesture, but it was apparently friendly. "Watch your step among Keastonian women or you may learn something of the swordsmanship of Keastonian men."

"We'll match swords one way or another soon," Appertan replied, setting one hand on his belt. He wasn't wearing a sword, such being forbidden in the common room. He managed to wink at the inspector.

The man held his position for a moment and then, with a sniff, marched away. Appertan did not move, his shoulders still against the wall. But there was the slightest layer of sweat now between wall and shoulders.

Eventually, the tall man had seen every face in the common room, and made his way to the

door. The innkeeper was suddenly at his elbow.

"We had hoped Your Excellency would avail yourself of some of our hospitality."

The Inspector turned completely neutral eyes on him. Appertan sensed that the man never availed himself of anyone's hospitality. "I have much to do."

"Yes, Your Excellency."

"We seek a fugitive. Keep your eyes open. Anyone who turns the woman in will be rewarded; anyone who offers her shelter will be hanged. She is slender, dark of hair, pale and narrow of face. Her singing voice is somewhat deeper than normal for a woman. She uses the name Polijn. Notify me if you see any unfamiliar dark-haired women in the area."

"Yes, Your Excellency." The innkeeper bowed. "What is this woman wanted for?"

He had to take three steps back before the cold eyes of the inspector. The agent waited only until the innkeeper started to apologize, then he barked, "She is wanted for questioning." He turned and marched away.

The fire was suddenly brighter, and a number of men around the room were all at once extremely thirsty. Appertan sat forward now and noted to the man on his left, "I know now why they say your winters are so mild. Nothing will ever make me feel the cold again after those eyes."

"Ah, he's an icicle, no mistake." The man drained his mug. "Clear ice, though. If he was chief constable, now, there's men who'd pay

their taxes singing and not grumble where the money went." He threw a glance over one shoulder. "And no holding of young women for . . . questioning."

Best to feign ignorance. "Why, what kinds of questions has he got?" Appertan demanded.

The man studied his empty mug morosely. "I'm not so drunk as all that, young man." He raised his eyes to peer at the foreigner. "Come to think of it, you've a resemblance to our inspector."

"Then you're quite drunk enough, friend." Appertan stood up. "My grandfather never came to Keastone, so there's nothing in that."

The older man reached up and put a hand on the tourist's wrist. "Watch your step, young man. The chief constable has colder eyes and less honest ears than the inspector's in town."

"Well, if it amuses anyone to watch what I'm up to, they're welcome." He eased the other man's hand away. "I'll leave your chief constable the dark ones, as there are enough fairhaired damsels in Keastone for the questioning. I give you good evening."

Reaching the door, he found the innkeeper at his elbow. "Not leaving, young master?" The Ring and Whistle was a popular inn among the locals, but rich tourists provided whiskey with the beer. "I can offer you a good room. Two gentlemen have spoken for it, but they're willing to share, and they've ordered two dozen bottles of my best to be sent up."

Appertan nodded. "Save some

space for me, then." He winked. "I'm off to question a young lady myself. I swear I'll get sweeter answers than any constable in the land."

The innkeeper cringed at the reference. Laughing, the young tourist swaggered into the street. His eyes roamed among the passersby, challenging any of them to debate his presence in their city. He swaggered faster where the crowds thinned. If the inspector kept busy searching from inn to inn, there might be time to acquire some distance. Those cold eyes had held no hint of doubt about Appertan, but for Appertan this was scant comfort. If Polijn was not discovered in one of the inns, all dark-haired foreigners would have to face those eyes again.

His swagger slowed again at the city gates. The gates had not been closed in living memory, but they were guarded. Another inspector might be waiting here. But no one stopped the tourist as he moved on out; he raised one hand in a salute to the sleepy sentry.

Polijn and Appertan were in complete agreement that the climate in Keastone was unlikely to prove healthy, at least until the accession of a new chief constable. East was the quickest way out, but here that meant the mountain passes, and those were easy to watch. Appertan and Polijn had agreed to head south first, until they were clear of the mountains. The presence of the inspector showed that this had not been entirely unanticipated.

The moon was high in the sky by the time Appertan thought it might be safe to stop. Some farm outbuildings were guarded by dogs or surrounded by fences; others were not. Polijn vetoed an ice-house and then a smokehouse as not being suitable for sleeping. At length a barn presented itself, an old barn with broken boards near the ground. It was a cautious slide inside, for fear of sleeping dogs or wakeful rats.

A gap high in the wall let moonlight point out the hay. Careful, quiet burrowing soon produced a cave in which Polijn and Appertan could be hidden. Curling up in the chamber, Appertan's hand slid along a warm thigh.

"Hey!"

Two figures jumped away from each other, scattering hay. Both shushed each other at the same time.

"What're you doing?" came a fierce whisper. "Who are you?"

"I'm hiding," Polijn replied. "My name is . . . Appertan."

"Are you a thief?" An apparition moved into the moonlight. Polijn blinked.

Even strewn with hay, the dimpled blonde was not something she had expected to find in a barn. She was perhaps as much as fourteen years old, and very expensively dressed, obviously no peasant girl on a rendezvous.

"I'm Tayala. I'm hiding, too."

Polijn observed the bundle the girl clutched, and nodded. "Where are you going?"

The big shrug bounced great masses of straw-littered curls.

"Away from the mountains."

"South?"

"Either that or west." Tayala's head came forward. "Why? Where are you going?"

Polijn hesitated, knowing what would come next. She finally said, "South."

Tayala took three steps forward. "Oh, let's go together. It's so much more comfortable with two. You have no idea how hard it is to find clean water when you're trying to hide at the same time."

Polijn preferred to travel alone: it was quicker and you didn't have to explain what you were up to. But if the chief constable had his agents out looking for a dark-haired woman, a dark-haired man eloping with this dimpled bit of pastry would be far less suspicious than a dark-haired man strolling on his own.

"What are you running away from?" Polijn inquired.

Ripe red lips squeezed together in disapproval. "I am not running away. I'm escaping."

Polijn nodded again. "I should have known you were too old to run away. What are you escaping?"

"Father wants me to marry somebody." The girl sighed. "I have to choose, but they're both more than forty, and smelly besides."

Polijn nodded again. "Where are you going?"

The curls were bounced again by the shoulders. "Oh, they always need singers and dancers in the music halls in the south; everyone knows that." She cocked her hips to one side. "I'm very pretty, you know."

"Ye-es." Polijn fully intended to use the infant as her passport, but felt a tiny twinge of guilt. There was rather more than singing and dancing involved in being employed by the music halls of South Keastone. Still, there might be something she could do for Tayala, short of hauling the child east with her.

"You could be the guard at the door," the girl went on, her curls flailing wildly as she nodded this conclusion on her visitor. "I bet you're good with a sword."

"We'll see what comes our way. In the meantime, we need sleep before the journey. Now that we've been introduced . . ." Polijn bowed, gesturing toward the cave in the hay.

"Oh, my sainted father and mother, yes!" Tayala dashed some of the straw from her hair. "I was so tired I hardly even *noticed* how cold it was and I was falling asleep when I heard you. I thought you were a cow." Stooping, she crawled into the burrow. "It will be so much nicer this way."

The child was not the least bit shy of strangers; Polijn had hardly set her back against the fugitive when she found plump arms wrapped around her waist. It was definitely warmer, however, than curling up alone in the hay would have been. Polijn was drifting into slumber when she was brought to full alert by two lips pressed to the back of her neck.

"I've just had the loveliest idea!" those lips whispered.

"Couldn't it have waited until morning?"

"You're as cross as Father." The lips pouted for a second, but then went on, "Why don't you compromise me?"

Polijn neither moved nor spoke for three full seconds. "You said?"

"If you compromised me," Tayala told her, "I'd have to marry you, and then I wouldn't have to run a . . . escape from home, and I wouldn't have to marry either of the generals. And you smell lots better."

Polijn was silent again, giving a bit of thought to a theory that she actually *had* fallen asleep, and was dreaming this. "Generals, you say."

"It happened to my cousin," the girl said. "When she was compromised, she was married that very same week. So the generals wouldn't have time to plot to kill you."

"That's . . . comforting."

"So if you don't mind, I'm ready to be compromised."

Polijn believed this implicitly. "You, er, do you know that being compromised means dishonored."

"Well . . . every time somebody mentions her name, Mother shushes . . ."

"Ah!" Polijn had the idea now. "And I suppose it was a very quick wedding."

"I told you, it was the very same week."

"I wouldn't want to marry anybody in a quick, dishonorable ceremony," Polijn told her. "Don't you see how much better it would be to do it all with full ceremony, in full view of everyone?"

"But the generals . . ."

"Can you see it?" Polijn inquired. "The smile on the face of your father, the tears on his cheeks at the same time? Your mother is being brave..."

"She's screaming at somebody, you mean."

"Screaming at somebody that her daughter has made her prouder than ever before," Polijn informed her. "Can you hear it? Maybe you can't, with the bells and drums that herald the great moment. The smell of the candles is mixing with the incense." Polijn tried to remember whether they included incense in the wedding ceremonies around here, and then decided it couldn't hurt. "As I step through the door, I have to stop and catch my breath. The gold sheen of your gown is reflecting the candlelight up into your heavenly face."

"I might wear the blue one."

Polijn's eyes rolled up. "But with gold panels."

"Oh, yes! Yes, that would be nice."

"Think of it," Polijn insisted. "How could you miss a moment of it, right up to the feel of your father's hand as he sets yours in mine? The delicate tremble of your fingers as the words ring out making you my wife."

She was suddenly surrounded by curls as the head behind her came forward to rest on her shoulder. "A time to remember forever," murmured Tayala.

"Without a doubt," Polijn told her quietly.

"Mm-hmm," the girl replied and, halfway through a hug, fell

cheerfully and romantically asleep. Polijn sighed, and closed her eyes.

When a hint of sunlight broke through a crack in the eastern wall of the barn, Polijn woke and slipped from Tayala's embrace. She paused for a moment, looking down at the child, hoping this interlude alone wasn't enough to compromise her by local standards. Perhaps no one would know. Polijn had decided to set off alone. A passport like this girl would have helped her make it to the border, but this particular one wouldn't do. With two generals looking for her, not to mention a father capable of commanding two generals as suitors, she would bring Polijn more trouble than that inspector could do on his own.

So, hefting her pack to a comfortable position on her back, Polijn turned. Had she turned a bit faster, the swordpoint would have cut right into the base of her stomach.

"By my sainted father and mother, I hope you had a good night. It'll be your last."

Polijn's eyes did not linger on the sword, going to the face of the growling man. She had never seen him before.

"Oh, Keglín!" The voice came from behind her. "How did you find me?"

The man's eyes didn't move at all, daring Polijn to make a move. "I've come to take you home, My Lady. As soon as we've dealt with him."

"Well!" Tayala rose, shaking straw from all over her clothes. "I

was coming home anyway. Appertan met me here and convinced me it was better not to run from my destiny." She set a hand on Polijn's arm. "Then he stood guard over me all night."

"Is that a fact?"

Polijn declined to comment. Tayala trotted around her and slapped down the blade. "Come on, Keglin. Don't let Peria do these things to you." She took Polijn's hand and dragged her past the man. "His wife keeps telling him he's got to be really tough if he wants to be Captain of the Guard some day. Hi, Wilshua!"

She had reached the door. The air rang with whistles and cheers. "We found her! She's safe!" Tayala, a smile splitting her face, pulled Polijn up next to her.

"You can see why I really wouldn't want to leave," she whispered.

Suddenly the men fell silent. Polijn didn't need to look to know their commander had just stepped from the barn. She could feel the heat of his gaze on the back of her head.

"We will ride back," Keglin ground out. The dozen men suddenly became very busy with their horses. He strode forward and turned to face Polijn. "As for you, if you move beyond a sword-length from me, then, by my sainted father and mother, I will cut you down."

Tayala snapped her little pink fingers in the air. "Don't be silly! How can you, if he's more than a swordlength away? Come on!"

She marched Polijn over to one

of the men, who stood with two horses, looking uneasily, if with a smile, from Tayala to Keglin and then to Polijn. "We, er, brought only one spare horse, My Lady," he said.

"Oh, I think we can fit on the saddle together." The girl now put an arm around Polijn's waist. "Do you want the reins?"

"I trust you." This was not entirely true, but Polijn could tell by the way Tayala bounded into the saddle that the girl had probably been fitted for a saddle before she was housebroken, while Polijn's riding experience was limited largely to occasionally straddling the bony carthorse of Nikana, the rag and bone collector in the swamp.

It was all she could do to pull herself up behind the girl without demolishing Appertan's image. By the time she was secure there, she could see that the group around them had expanded far beyond the dozen or so armed men. This now included the family that owned the farm, and probably their closest neighbors and most important relatives.

A cry of "Lady Tayala! Jolly Lady Tayala! Hooray!" rang from those assembled. Polijn licked her lips. The girl's father had to be someone of significance. Remaining inconspicuous now wasn't going to be easy.

Lady Tayala led the company back into the town, not even trying to stay a swordlength away from Keglin. The man glowered, but did not attempt to close the gap, either not trusting his horse-

manship against the reckless riding of Tayala, or just not willing to cut down someone sitting so close to the girl. There were too many witnesses.

Inside the gates of the city, they were suddenly the center of a huge, cheering parade. Men were throwing their hats in the air; women were waving scarves. The innkeeper of the night before was passing out clay pipes and mugs of beer—for free, as far as Polijn could tell from here. She rather wished she had tried to sleep in the smokehouse after all.

They reached a gap where the crowd did not cheer. One man stood there alone. Cold eyes raked along the Hero Appertan. As the inspector rubbed his chin, Polijn raised hers and looked away.

The parade was a long time in reaching the center of the city. To Polijn's surprise, it did not stop at the town square, but continued through to the far gate of town, and then up the mountain-side. Its goal was apparently a thick, heavy castle built into the side of the crag.

At the gatehouse, itself massive enough for a good castle, Tayala leapt from the saddle and ran inside. Polijn found herself in Keglin's care, escorted to an inner room where there was nothing but a chair and space for five guards. Polijn sat in the chair and concentrated on making nothing that could be construed as a false move. There were several questions she was of a mind to ask. Somehow she felt Keglin was not the man of whom to ask them.

They waited for what felt like eight months, the guards not bothering to hide their swords, until a boy rushed into the room with a note for Keglin. He waited, plainly staring at Polijn, while the officer read the message. "My sainted father and mother," muttered the captain.

When the man looked up, he nodded to the guards, who sheathed their weapons, and then bowed stiffly to the person he knew as Appertan. "Sir," he told Polijn, "His Lordship will be pleased to see you now."

Then he turned and aimed a kick at the messenger. "Out of the way, brat."

Keglin looked at Polijn again. She rose and marched from the room, the guards falling in behind her. Tayala, she understood, had by some magic spell transformed Appertan from prisoner to honored guest.

The room to which she was escorted was quite a different room: vast, warm, ornate, and thronged with people. These people, whose everyday clothes cost more than everything Polijn owned, parted to allow the little group to pass. Scanning the faces, Polijn found excitement and joy, but mostly curiosity. They were probably not curious about Keglin and his men.

A familiar face appeared, with a space two-faces wide on each side of it. She eased her pace to whisper, "Who is that?"

Keglin didn't look back; he had also obviously noticed the face. "The chief constable's inspector

for Undry is on a special mission, and had to rest his horse."

Polijn nodded. "Has he been here long?"

"He arrived while you were . . . waiting."

Polijn nodded again and said nothing else. If the inspector were involved in this assembly, he'd have been standing closer to the front of the group.

Eventually, she stood before a pair of high, gilded chairs where sat two heavily gilded people, similarly blond and high of cheekbone, with thick lips. They were perhaps twenty years older than the girl Polijn found, heart sinking, smiling at her from a seat just to the left of and a little behind the couple.

Keglin saluted. "Aldin, by Grace of His Imperial Majesty, Count of Undry, and Lady Joaman! Behold Appertan!"

Appertan took another step forward, the better to be beheld. The man in golden robes stood; he would have towered over his guest even without the platform occupied by the thrones. "Appertan, we welcome you to this, our humble shelter." His eyes rose to the crowd. "Let all hear the good news: Appertan is the hero who rescued our daughter and heir from great danger when she vanished during the night!" The eyes, intensely blue and alarmingly alert, came down again. "Appertan, you have our thanks, and the thanks of all the people in Undry."

"Any man would be honored by the opportunity to give service,

Your Grace," the hero replied, with a deep bow.

The crowd rumbled approval. The Count of Undry waited for this to subside before inclining his head to reply, "It is an honor, as you say, but not honor enough for your notable service. A visible reward, not as payment for your service but as symbol of our high regard, must be determined."

From the corner of an eye, Polijn saw Tayala stretch, round shoulders arching back, dimpled arms extended. Her first thought was that Tayala knew the count was about to make a very long speech. A second glance showed her the stretch had been one of excitement and barely suppressed energy. Appertan licked his upper lip and waited with apprehension to learn what Tayala already knew.

It was as bad as possible. "It would seem to us that the most suitable reward is the treasure you have returned to us." Tayala slid forward; only a fierce face made by her mother kept her in her seat. "We have long sought a suitable husband for our daughter and heir and, by my sainted father, it seems we may have found one."

"Seems" and "may" were encouraging, but Polijn could see that Appertan would be an easy solution to the problem at hand: how to give the child away to one general without starting a war with the other. Looking around a bit as the Count of Undry extolled the virtues of his daughter and probable son-in-law, she had

no difficulty identifying the disappointed suitors by their deep glowers. The calculating looks cast her way by some of the older ladies-in-waiting didn't make her feel any more at home.

There ought to be, she thought, a way to get Appertan out of this without mentioning Polijn. She thought of several simple ways, and thought of seven reasons why each wouldn't do. Better to be elaborate; it suited the surroundings.

The time inevitably came for Appertan to respond to his future father-in-law's proposition. He bowed again. "Your Grace has shown me honor beyond measure." His face was smooth and unconcerned as he looked up into the blazing blue eyes of the man who could order him cut to shreds at the least lack of enthusiasm. "But how is it that Your Grace would so condescend as to offer the fairest flower in all the land to a nobody, a wanderer, a person of whom anything might be suspected?" Appertan did not look back toward the inspector.

The count opened his mouth to reply; Tayala, however, had been silent enough. "But a nobody could be *anybody*!" she said, still a little flushed from "fairest flower."

"By my sainted father, you would be my son-in-law, whom no one would dare suspect." And the Count of Undry *did* look at the inspector.

Appertan bowed again. "Eventually, I do hope, Your Grace. Any man would eagerly accept what

you offer. But surely the restoration of even so magnificent a treasure to Your Grace is no more than any man of true mind would do. Let me but prove myself to these fair-minded people by bringing, as my wedding gift to the lovely Tayala, the Necklace of Broum."

The Countess of Undry was much struck by this. Polijn's eyes slid left and right to judge the crowd, gauging audience sentiment. The incurably romantic were interested, but these were the minority. On the other faces, she saw the question, "What is this young man up to?"

"The legendary Necklace of Broum," Appertan declared, swaggering a bit so that he faced more of the crowd and not that now-somewhat-heavy gaze of the count, "the elegant strand of gold hardly less delicate than the Lady Tayala, set with emeralds nearly as bright and perfect as her eyes."

She definitely had the countess and Tayala in her camp, but there was a lot of work to be done yet. "You all know the story: by my sainted father and mother, it is a tale known to all; how the necklace was made for Broum, the Tayala of her day, who on her birthday was carried away by an evil sorceress on a skull-faced eagle and was imprisoned in a high tower and tormented day and night with enchanted peacock feathers, that her screams might attract the high-flying zet, that rare bird too fast to be captured unless lured in by the high-pitched cry of its mate."

Appertan did not poll the audience to be sure everybody knew the story, but went through the whole tale, keeping half the audience attentive by frequent references to the beauty of Tayala and, indeed, all the women of Undry, and keeping the other half alert by returning to those peacock feathers from time to time. The story was a long one, generally reserved for long winter nights up north, of how three brothers went after the key to the gate of the sorceress's mountain tower, how the oldest brother failed and was turned into an ox, and how the second brother failed and became an eagle. The third brother, naturally, did better, finding the key, but even he needed the help of the ox and the eagle to reach the tower, save Broum, and turn the skull-faced bird against its owner.

"The evil tower faced away to become part of the mountain, but just as the princess took her last look at it, the rascally raven that had always roosted on the sorceress's shoulder came and caught the necklace in its beak, and the key in its claws. The eagle snapped at the raven, tearing one wing. The bird and its treasures dropped somewhere on the mountain, lost forever as was the sorceress's hoard of ill-gotten gold."

"Ooh!" Tayala had been rocking back and forth on the edge of her seat for some time, clasp- ing and unclasping her hands. Now she applauded lustily. "I want that at my wedding! Can you find it for me?"

Appertan let the crowd roar

agreement for a bit and then raised a hand. "The necklace," he declared, "is on the eastern face of Oerig Mountain."

Oerig Mountain had every qualification for hiding a Neck- lace of Broum. It was near enough that any number of people could get there from here in three days. (Some men were already whis- pering to others; Appertan would not be alone on this quest.) It was the tallest mountain for miles, of- fering a lot of room for a Necklace of Broum to hide. Further, it was the only mountain hereabouts that Polijn could recall the name of at this moment.

She had not expected to win over the count, so she was not dis- mayed when he inquired, "How can you be so sure?"

Appertan reached into his belt. "I have a map." He drew a rolled piece of paper from inside the leather.

The crowd leaned forward, but the count held his position. "There have no doubt been many maps to this among other treasures. Why should we believe in your map?"

"It is a good map, Your Grace," Appertan informed the count, his face eager. "Because I also have this."

He reached into the belt again and brought out an object that glittered in the palm of his hand. The crowd pushed forward again as Appertan stepped up, taking a slight detour so that he climbed the platform not in front of the count or the countess but near Tayala's chair. He dropped the ob- ject from his palm to hers.

"Ooh!" she said again, though whether it was the touch of the object or the touch of Appertan's hand that caused this, Appertan didn't know.

"Hand that to His Grace," Appertan suggested.

Tayala held it in the air and waved it about a bit first. The shaft shimmered in torchlight, sending out tiny reflected rays of blue and green. Every eye in the crowd seemed locked on the object; Polijn took a quick look around to see if they were gathered too close for her to find the exit. Her eyes met those of the inspector. She shrugged and turned back to the count.

There was a tinge of awe in his voice as he demanded, "What is this?"

"That," Appertan declared, "is the key snatched up in the raven's claws before it tumbled to the rocks. The Necklace of Broum, as well as the rest of the sorceress's treasure, waits where it sat."

"Is that all you took?" demanded a voice from the crowd.

Appertan turned to bow once more. "I had never descended Oerig Mountain; I wanted no more than I could easily carry among the rocks. As for the Necklace of Broum, I knew no woman worthy to wear it . . . until now."

Tayala all but swooned, and her mother fell back, fanning herself. The Count of Undry considered the key and then looked to Appertan again.

"Give us the map."

"It is a privilege," Appertan informed him.

The count accepted the paper without a word, and looked from it to the key several times. Appertan pushed a stray strand of hair from his forehead as he waited.

Finally, he raised both hands, the key in one, the map in another. "So let it be done!"

The crowd bellowed. The count tucked the key and the map somewhere within his robes and raised those hands again. The crowd was silent almost immediately.

"And as we have seen that more than one man in the crowd is interested in the quest, and the hand of our daughter, by my sainted father, let them not work secretly, but in the open, as benefits so noble a treasure. We shall have copies made of the map, that anyone who wishes to attempt the search may do so come morning. We ask only that there be no killing along the way, and that some, at least, remain behind, so our walls will still be defended. The first to return from Oerig Mountain as far as the Sylvan Beacon will send a signal to let us know to prepare for you. I shall send a cart of tysekh wood to the beacon now, so the color of the signal will be unmistakable.

"Now, by my sainted father, let there be joy at the return of our daughter and heir!"

There followed a long party, with much to eat and a great deal of dancing, during which Appertan learned that the women of the district had strong grips and probing fingers. He was equal to the challenge, besides having a

natural excuse to do most of his dancing with Tayala, whose fingers were no less nimble but less experienced. The fingers that concerned Polijn the most were the ones handling the pens that made copies of the map she'd handed the count.

Hardly anyone slept much, but everyone was ready by mid-morning. Some men, like Appertan, were afoot, while others rode horses. Some optimistic souls had brought large, heavy carts which would hold a great deal of treasure. Tayala was indignant about this: not so much about the greed involved, nor even that most of the men with wagons were townsmen, and not from her father's court at all. What bothered her were the men she recognized.

"Look!" she told Appertan, whose side she had not left all morning. "That's Farver! He's older than General Kiitner; he has a wife and children. *Grandchildren!* He's not marrying me, I tell you. I'll go be a dancer!"

"He can't go very fast with that cart," Appertan assured her. "He won't even get it up the mountain."

Tayala delivered a brisk little nod. "You'll come back first, I know it." She didn't sound terribly confident. "After all, you know right where it is. You don't really need the map, right? By my sainted father and mother, I know you'll be back first."

"Mmm. I'd better go down with the rest of them so they don't get a head start."

Appertan started away, but

Tayala wasn't going to let him go without a kiss. She took her time over it. It was not the run down to the road that had Appertan trying to catch his breath when he got there.

The Count of Undry was at the head of the pack. "Remember the honor you strive for," he declared, "and let that honor be a guide to honorable conduct." He had changed into more serviceable clothes than the gilded robes of state, and he drew a well-made but somewhat scarred sword. Pointing this toward the mountains on the horizon, he pulled away from the group before the open gate.

"May the best of luck be with the best of you!" he declared, looking straight at Appertan. He pointed with his sword at the men who waited above the gate, trumpets ready.

Appertan heard not a single note from the trumpets for the thud of hoofbeats and the cheers of the crowd. He did hear Tayala scream "Flausa cheated! I saw him! Flausa cheated! I saw him start running before the horn!"

The running pack kicked up a lot of dust, for not only were the hopeful men running for the mountains, but most of the audience wanted to come along for part of the trip. Everyone had a favorite contestant to follow; Polijn was not gratified to find that Appertan had an enormous coterie of admirers running along with him, commenting on his running style and his chances. The plan sort of required getting lost in the pack;

she should have realized that Tayala's rescuer would be singled out. She checked around her, making sure the horses were all ahead of them on the road.

Then, uttering a loud and colorful opinion, Appertan "tripped," his arms going up over his face as he rolled against the legs of as many people as possible. Screams and shouts penetrated the growing tangle of people in the roadway:

"Did you see that?"

"I told you! He's sneaky, too!"

"Oh, he's got to be the one!"

"Where did he go?"

That last was the compliment Polijn and Appertan had waited for. A cloak or bag had dropped from someone's supplies; she snatched this up and, throwing it over her head and shoulders, scrambled along among the feet in the zone where crowd and competitors were most promiscuously mixed.

"Did you see him?"

"Do you see him now?"

"Where'd he go?"

"A magic ring! He's got a magic ring and didn't want us to see!"

"There!" Polijn rose to her feet and pointed. "Isn't that Appertan?"

As the crowd looked right, Polijn ducked left, headed for that sentry box. Tayala had told her where the wagonload of tysekh wood was going to wait until the road was clear. Polijn wasted no time about crawling in among the sticks and branches.

Tysekh was a smooth, fragrant wood which burned to give off decidedly yellow smoke. There was little danger of splinters, save from

the bed of the cart, and as soon as Polijn found a spot in the middle of the load, she wedged herself in to wait. The Sylvan Beacon was not exactly in the direction she'd intended to go, but it would at least put some miles between her and the castle. If the cart didn't leave soon and she could find a way to do it without too many people seeing her, she might try to get to the castle instead and have a word with the count or countess. They'd have nothing but trouble if Tayala wound up marrying a general after all.

The driver of the cart would have to decide that. For now, she thought she might try to make up for lost sleep. Tucking her stolen camouflage between her head and a bundle of sticks, she closed her eyes.

She opened them some time later when sticks rattled around her. Opening her eyes but making no other move, she watched a sword-point appear here and there among the branches. Her spot was well inside, though; so long as they didn't fetch a spear or pike, she could hold this position.

"You may come out now, Sir Appertan," declared a severe voice.

Unless, of course, the inspector's eyes had been sharp enough to follow her through the crowd.

"In fact, it would be best if you came out before I light the beacon here and now."

Crawling from her shelter, Polijn found herself looking up into the blazing blue eyes of the Count of Undry. He was alone; his sword was raised toward the tysekh wood.

"By my sainted father, I'd like to hear a reason why your headless body shouldn't rot in the slough for this trick."

His teeth were gritted, making his voice as unfriendly as that of the inspector. Polijn came out to perch on the end of the cart bed, crossing her legs. "Would it have been a more pleasant trick to marry your daughter to a woman?"

He frowned at her. Polijn knew the same energy she'd seen in Tayala was waiting for her on the hilt of that sword.

She stuck her thumbs behind the waistband of her trousers. "I can prove it to you, if you like. I'm the Polijn the inspector has been sent to find. Hand me over to him, and you'll be rewarded by the chief constable, and perhaps the emperor himself."

"His Imperial Majesty," the count corrected her. "You're a fugitive?"

"The chief constable likes brunettes," she told him. "But I know what he likes them for, and why he has to replace them every few days. I left. He didn't like that."

Polijn also knew how the chief constable would react when she was brought in. But she hadn't been brought in yet. The inspector was the future; this swordpoint was now.

The count said nothing; his frown threatened to take over his whole face. Polijn rose a little. "Shall I . . ."

"By my sainted father!" The swordpoint thudded into the dirt. "It was another Imperial regime, and another chief constable, but

the results were the same for blondes. My mother committed suicide, and rather than admit to scandal in the Imperial retinue, they forbade us ever to mention her again. It won't be the Count of Undry who tells the inspector who and where you are."

Polijn made as if to jump down, but the swordpoint came up, spraying dirt through the air as it came to rest before her midsection. "But you have presented me with a pretty problem, Sir Appertan. A hundred or two hundred of my best men are now racing down the road to search a mountain for a necklace out of a story."

She shrugged, not backing away from the swordpoint. "Surely you have some promising young officer your daughter would like, years younger than your generals?"

"I have. But he's as unlikely as the rest to find this mythical necklace, even with that pretty map. Particularly since you described it incorrectly; family tradition says the necklace held diamonds, not emeralds."

"It's a good map," Polijn told him. "Someone should find a nice heap of treasure." She reached into her belt again. "You're right about them not finding the necklace, even if you are wrong about the diamonds."

The count's eyes were huge as they regarded the strands of gold hung with green stones. Polijn dropped it over the point of the sword. "That should make it easy to find her a husband who suits her as well as this necklace will."

She could see his brain working over the problem. At last he drew his sword back and plucked the necklace from it with his free hand. "I don't know what can repay you," he said. "This might, indeed, keep the peace in Undry. But you've already turned down the greatest treasure I have."

"I couldn't have spent it," Polijn noted.

"But perhaps I can send the cart by way of Diran, for more wood," he said. "That would bring you nearer the border."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Polijn said. "I better get back inside."

"Thank you again, my friend." The count sheathed his sword. "After all, you could easily have married her and then run away, which would have meant sending my whole army to look for you. And I believe that would have been as fruitless a task as hunting the Necklace of Broum."

Polijn climbed into her hiding place again. She braced herself to move when, some minutes later, she felt the cart bounce.

But instead, a clear and now unmistakable voice was musing, "I wonder if the chief constable doesn't require a load of tysekh wood. I could requisition one."

Polijn stayed exactly where she was. The inspector was no doubt blocking the tunnel through the wood, and there was no other place to run unless she ate her way through a few of the bundles.

"I heard what the two of you said. The Count of Undry is wise not to give his daughter to a foreigner, and I liked the way you

handled yourself, young *man*."

The last word made her lean forward. She could see the back of the inspector's head as he sat, apparently talking to himself.

"I could use a young *man* of your ability in my own company. But I understand you have a pressing desire to be elsewhere."

"I do," said Polijn.

He nodded. "It isn't the easiest of jobs for a young *man*, having to balance peacekeeping with pandering. But I believe peacekeeper comes before pander in my commission. So I will merely add my thanks to those of the count, young *man*, and suggest that you leave this cart at the sixteenth milestone, and turn due south. It's the shortest way to the border."

"The sixteenth milestone. South."

"And don't let us meet again, necklace or no."

"Agreed."

The inspector hopped down from the cart, but paused as if about to say something more. Then he spun and walked away. Polijn pulled back again among the wood, settling into her nest. A squeal and a gentle touch on her arm made her freeze. This could not be happening. She closed her eyes.

The cart jolted, and she understood that the squeal had been no more than the complaint of old wooden wheels. Opening her eyes, she found that the touch was merely that of a large and undoubtedly venomous spider.

Polijn leaned back. At last she could relax. □

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Sweet Shot

E. C. Bentley



Illustration by M. K. Perker

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“No; I happened to be abroad at the time,” Philip Trent said. “I wasn’t in the way of seeing the English papers, so until I came here this week I never heard anything about your mystery.”

Captain Royden, a small, spare, brown-faced man, was engaged in the delicate—and forbidden—task of taking his automatic telephone instrument to pieces. He now suspended his labours and reached for the tobacco jar. The large window of his office in the Kempshill clubhouse looked down upon the eighteenth green of that delectable golf course, and his eye roved over the whin-clad slopes beyond as he called on his recollection.

“Well, if you call it a mystery,” he said as he filled a pipe. “Some people do, because they like mysteries, I suppose. For instance, Colin Hunt, the man you’re staying with, calls it that. Others won’t have it, and say there was a perfectly natural explanation. I could tell you as much as anybody could about it, I dare say.”

“As being secretary here, you mean?”

“Not only that. I was one of the two people who were in at the death, so to speak—or next door to it,” Captain Royden said. He limped to the mantelshelf and took down a silver box embossed on the lid with the crest and mottoes of the Corps of Royal Engineers. “Try one of these cigarettes, Mr. Trent. If you’d like to hear the yarn, I’ll give it you. You have heard something about Arthur Freer, I suppose?”

“Hardly anything,” Trent said. “I just gathered that he wasn’t a very popular character.”

“No,” Captain Royden said with reserve. “Did they tell you he was my brother-in-law? No? Well, now, it happened about four months ago, on a Monday—let me see—yes, the second Monday in May. Freer had a habit of playing nine holes before breakfast. Barring Sundays—he was strict about Sunday—he did it most days, even in the beastliest weather, going round all alone usually, carrying his own clubs, studying every shot as if his life depended on it. That helped to make him the very good player he was. His handicap here was two, and at Undershaw he used to be scratch, I believe.

“At a quarter to eight he’d be on the first tee, and by nine he’d be back at his house—it’s only a few minutes from here. That Monday morning he started off as usual—”

“And at the usual time?”

“Just about. He had spent a few minutes in the clubhouse blowing up the steward about some trifle. And that was the last time he was seen alive by anybody—near enough to speak to, that is. No one else went off the first tee until a little after nine, when I started round with Brownson—he’s our local padre; I had been having breakfast with him at the

Vicarage. He's got a game leg, like me, so we often play together when he can fit it in.

"We had holed out on the first green, and were walking on to the next tee, when Browson said, 'Great Scott! Look there. Something's happened.' He pointed down the fairway of the second hole; and there we could see a man lying sprawled on the turf, face down and motionless. Now there is this point about the second hole—the first half of it is in a dip in the land, just deep enough to be out of sight from any other point on the course, unless you're standing right above it—you'll see when you go round yourself. Well, on the tee, you *are* right above it; and we saw this man lying. We ran to the spot.

"It was Freer, as I had known it must be at that hour. He was dead, lying in a disjointed sort of way no live man could have lain in. His clothing was torn to ribbons, and it was singed too. So was his hair—he used to play bareheaded—and his face and hands. His bag of clubs was lying a few yards away, and the brassie, which he had just been using, was close by the body.

"There wasn't any wound showing, and I had seen far worse things often enough, but the padre was looking sickish, so I asked him to go back to the clubhouse and send for a doctor and the police while I mounted guard. They weren't long coming, and after they had done their job the body was taken away in an ambulance. Well, that's about all I can tell you at first hand, Mr. Trent. If you are staying with Hunt, you'll have heard about the inquest and all that, probably."

Trent shook his head. "No," he said. "Colin was just beginning to tell me, after breakfast this morning, about Freer having been killed on the course in some incomprehensible way, when a man came to see him about something. So, as I was going to apply for a fortnight's run of the course, I thought I would ask you about the affair."

"All right," Captain Royden said. "I can tell you about the inquest anyhow—had to be there to speak my own little piece, about finding the body. As for what had happened to Freer, the medical evidence was rather confusing. It was agreed that he had been killed by some tremendous shock, which had jolted his whole system to pieces and dislocated several joints, but had been not quite violent enough to cause any visible wound. Apart from that, there was a disagreement. Freer's own doctor, who saw the body first, declared he must have been struck by lightning. He said it was true there hadn't been a thunderstorm, but that there had been thunder about all that weekend, and that sometimes lightning did act in that way. But the police surgeon, Collins, said there would be no such displacement of the organs from a lightning stroke, even if it did ever happen that way in our climate, which he doubted. And he said that if it had been lightning, it would have struck the steel-headed clubs; but the clubs lay there in their bag quite undamaged. Collins thought

there must have been some kind of explosion, though he couldn't suggest what kind."

Trent shook his head. "I don't suppose that impressed the court," he said. "All the same, it may have been all the honest opinion he could give." He smoked in silence a few moments, while Captain Royden attended to the troubles of his telephone instrument with a camel-hair brush. "But surely," Trent said at length, "if there had been such an explosion as that, somebody would have heard the sound of it."

"Lots of people would have heard it," Captain Royden answered. "But there you are, you see—nobody notices the sound of explosions just about here. There's the quarry on the other side of the road there, and any time after seven A.M. there's liable to be a noise of blasting."

"A dull, sickening thud?"

"Jolly sickening," Captain Royden said, "for all of us living near by. And so that point wasn't raised. Well, Collins is a very sound man; but as you say, his evidence didn't really explain the thing, and the other fellow's did, whether it was right or wrong. Besides, the coroner and the jury had heard about a bolt from a clear sky, and the notion appealed to them. Anyhow, they brought it in death from misadventure."

"Which nobody could deny, as the song says," Trent remarked. "And there was no other evidence?"

"Yes; some. But Hunt can tell you about it as well as I can; he was there. I shall have to ask you to excuse me now," Captain Royden said. "I have an appointment in the town. The steward will sign you on for a fortnight, and probably get you a game too, if you want one today."

Colin Hunt and his wife, when Trent returned to their house for luncheon, were very willing to complete the tale. The verdict, they declared, was tripe. Dr. Collins knew his job, whereas Dr. Hoyle was an old footler, and Freer's death had never been reasonably explained.

As for the other evidence, it had, they agreed, been interesting, though it didn't help at all. Freer had been seen after he had played his tee shot at the second hole, when he was walking down to the bottom of the dip towards the spot where he met his death.

"But according to Royden," Trent said, "that was a place where he couldn't be seen, unless one was right above him."

"Well, this witness *was* right above him," Hunt rejoined. "About one thousand feet above him, so he said. He was an R.A.F. man, piloting a bomber from Bexford Camp, not far from here. He was up doing some sort of exercise, and passed over the course just at that time. He didn't know Freer, but he spotted a man walking down from the second tee, because he was the only living soul visible on the course. Gossett, the other man in the plane, is a temporary member here, and he did know Freer quite well—or as well as anybody cared to know him—but he

never saw him. However, the pilot was quite clear that he saw a man just at the time in question, and they took his evidence so as to prove that Freer was absolutely alone just before his death. The only other person who saw Freer was another man who knew him well; used to be a caddy here, and then got a job at the quarry. He was at work on the hillside, and he watched Freer play the first hole and go on to the second—nobody with him, of course."

"Well, that was pretty well established then," Trent remarked. "He was about as alone as he could be, it seems. Yet something happened somehow."

Mrs. Hunt sniffed sceptically, and lighted a cigarette. "Yes, it did," she said. "However, I didn't worry much about it, for one. Edith—Mrs. Freer, that is: Royden's sister—must have had a terrible life of it with a man like that. Not that she ever said anything—she wouldn't. She is not that sort."

"She is a jolly good sort, anyhow," Hunt declared.

"Yes, she is; too good for most men. I can tell you," Mrs. Hunt added for the benefit of Trent, "if Colin ever took to cursing me and knocking me about, my well-known loyalty wouldn't stand the strain for very long."

"That's why I don't do it. It's the fear of exposure that makes me the perfect husband, Phil. She would tie a can to me before I knew what was happening. As for Edith, it's true she never said anything, but the change in her since it happened tells the story well enough. Since she's been living with her brother she has been looking far better and happier than she ever succeeded in doing while Freer was alive."

"She won't be living with him for very long, I dare say," Mrs. Hunt intimated darkly.

"No. I'd marry her myself if I had the chance," Hunt agreed cordially.

"Pooh! You wouldn't be in the first six," his wife said. "It will be Renie, or Gossett, or possibly Sandy Butler—you'll see. But perhaps you've had enough of the local tittle-tattle, Phil. Did you fix up a game for this afternoon?"

"Yes; with the Jarman Professor of Chemistry in the University of Cambridge," Trent said. "He looked at me as if he thought a bath of vitriol would do me good, but he agreed to play me."

"You've got a tough job," Hunt observed. "I believe he is almost as old as he looks, but he is a devil at the short game, and he knows the course blindfold, which you don't. And he isn't so cantankerous as he pretends to be. By the way, he was the man who saw the finish of the last shot Freer ever played—a sweet shot if ever there was one. Get him to tell you."

"I shall try to," Trent said. "The steward told me about that, and that was why I asked the professor for a game."

Colin Hunt's prediction was fulfilled that afternoon. Professor Hyde, receiving five strokes, was one up at the seventeenth, and at the last

hole sent down a four-foot putt to win the match. As they left the green he remarked, as if in answer to something Trent had that moment said, "Yes: I can tell you a curious circumstance about Freer's death."

Trent's eye brightened; for the professor had not said a dozen words during their game, and Trent's tentative allusion to the subject after the second hole had been met merely by an intimidating grunt.

"I saw the finish of the last shot he played," the old gentleman went on, "without seeing the man himself at all. A lovely brassie it was, too—though lucky. Rolled to within two feet of the pin."

Trent considered. "I see," he said, "what you mean. You were near the second green, and the ball came over the ridge and ran down to the hole."

"Just so," Professor Hyde said. "That's how you play it—if you can. You might have done it yourself today, if your second shot had been thirty yards longer. I've never done it; but Freer often did. After a really good drive, you play a long second, blind, over the ridge; and with a perfect shot, you may get the green. Well, my house is quite near that green. I was pottering about in the garden before breakfast, and just as I happened to be looking towards the green a ball came hopping down the slope and trickled right across to the hole. Of course, I knew whose it must be—Freer always came along about that time. If it had been anyone else, I'd have waited to see him get his three, and congratulate him. As it was, I went indoors, and didn't hear of his death until long afterwards."

"And you never saw him play the shot," Trent said thoughtfully.

The professor turned a choleric blue eye on him. "How the deuce could I?" he said huffily. "I can't see through a mass of solid earth."

"I know, I know," Trent said. "I was only trying to follow your mental process. Without seeing him play the shot, you knew it was his second—you say he would have been putting for a three. And you said, too—didn't you?—that it was a brassie shot."

"Simply because, my young friend"—the Professor was severe—"I happened to know the man's game. I had played that nine holes with him before breakfast often, until one day he lost his temper more than usual, and made himself impossible. I knew he practically always carried the ridge with his second—I won't say he always got the green—and his brassie was the only club that would do it. It is conceivable, I admit," Professor Hyde added a little stiffly, "that some mishap took place, and that the shot in question was not actually Freer's second; but it did not occur to me to allow for that highly speculative contingency."

On the next day, after those playing a morning round were started on their perambulation, Trent indulged himself with an hour's practice, mainly on the unsurveyed stretch of the second hole. Afterwards he had

a word with the caddy master; then visited the professional's shop, and won the regard of that expert by furnishing himself with a new mid-iron. Soon he brought up the subject of the last shot played by Arthur Freer. A dozen times that morning, he said, he had tried, after a satisfying drive, to reach the green with his second; but in vain. Fergus MacAdam shook his head. Not many, he said, could strike the ball with yon force. He could get there himself, whiles, but never for a certainty. Mr. Freer had the strength, and he kened how to use it forbye.

What sort of clubs, Trent asked, had Freer preferred? "Lang and heavy, like himsel'. Noo ye mention it," MacAdam said, "I hae them here. They were brocht here after the ahccident." He reached up to the top of a rack. "Ay, here they are. They shouldna be, of course; but naebody came to claim them, and it juist slippit ma mind."

Trent, extracting the brassie, looked thoughtfully at the heavy head with the strip of hard white material inlaid in the face. "It's a powerful weapon, sure enough," he remarked.

"Ay, for a man that could control it," MacAdam said. "I dinna care for yon ivory face mysel'. Some fowk think it gies mair reseelience, ye ken; but there's naething in it."

"He didn't get it from you, then," Trent suggested, still closely examining the head.

"Ay, but he did. I had a lot down from Nelsons while the fashion for them was on. Ye'll find my name," MacAdam added, "stampit on the wood in the usual place, if yer een are seein' richt."

"Well, I don't—that's just it. The stamp is quite illegible."

"Tod! Let's see," the professional said, taking the club in hand. "Guid reason for its being illegible," he went on after a brief scrutiny. "It's been obleeterated—that's easy seen. Who ever saw sic a daft-like thing! The wood has juist been crushed some gait—in a vice, I wouldna wonder. Noo, why would onybody want to dae a thing like yon?"

"Unaccountable, isn't it?" Trent said. "Still, it doesn't matter, I suppose. And anyhow, we shall never know."

It was twelve days later that Trent, looking in at the open door of the secretary's office, saw Captain Royden happily engaged with the separated parts of some mechanism in which coils of wire appeared to be the leading motive.

"I see you're busy," Trent said.

"Come in! Come in!" Royden said heartily. "I can do this any time—another hour's work will finish it." He laid down a pair of sharp-nosed pliers. "The electricity people have just changed us over to A.C., and I've got to rewind the motor of our vacuum cleaner. Beastly nuisance," he added, looking down affectionately at the bewildering jumble of dis-articulated apparatus on his table.

"You bear your sorrow like a man," Trent remarked; and Royden laughed as he wiped his hands on a towel.

"Yes," he said, "I do love tinkering about with mechanical jobs, and if I do say so myself, I'd rather do a thing like this with my own hands than risk having it faultily done by a careless workman. Too many of them about. Why, about a year ago the company sent a man here to fit a new main fuse box, and he made a short circuit with his screw driver that knocked him right across the kitchen and might very well have killed him." He reached down his cigarette box and offered it to Trent, who helped himself; then looked down thoughtfully at the device on the lid.

"Thanks very much. When I saw this box before, I put you down for an R.E. man. *Ubique*, and *Quo fas et gloria ducunt*. Hm! I wonder why Engineers were given that motto in particular."

"Lord knows," the captain said. "In my experience, Sappers don't exactly go where right and glory lead. The dirtiest of all the jobs and precious little of the glory—that's what they get."

"Still, they have the consolation," Trent pointed out, "of feeling that they are at home in a scientific age, and that all the rest of the Army are amateurs compared with them. That's what one of them once told me, anyhow. Well now, Captain, I have to be off this evening. I've looked in just to say how much I've enjoyed myself here."

"Very glad you did," Captain Royden said. "You'll come again, I hope, now you know that the golf here is not so bad."

"I like it immensely. Also the members. And the secretary." Trent paused to light his cigarette. "I found the mystery rather interesting, too."

Captain Royden's eyebrows lifted slightly. "You mean about Freer's death? So you made up your mind that it *was* a mystery."

"Why, yes," Trent said. "Because I made up my mind he had been killed by somebody, and probably killed intentionally. Then, when I had looked into the thing a little, I washed out the 'probably.'"

Captain Royden took up a penknife from his desk and began mechanically to sharpen a pencil. "So you don't agree with the coroner's jury?"

"No: as the verdict seems to have been meant to rule out murder or any sort of human agency, I don't. The lightning idea, which apparently satisfied them, or some of them, was not a very bright one, I thought. I was told what Dr. Collins had said against it at the inquest; and it seemed to me he had disposed of it completely when he said that Freer's clubs, most of them steel ones, were quite undamaged. A man carrying his clubs puts them down, when he plays a shot, a few feet away at most; yet Freer was supposed to have been electrocuted without any notice having been taken of them, so to speak."

"Hm! No, it doesn't seem likely. I don't know that that quite decides the point, though," the captain said. "Lightning plays funny tricks, you know. I've seen a small tree struck when it was surrounded by trees

twice the size. All the same, I quite agree there didn't seem to be any sense in the lightning notion. It was thundery weather, but there wasn't any storm that morning in this neighbourhood."

"Just so. But when I considered what had been said about Freer's clubs, it suddenly occurred to me that nobody had said anything about *the* club, so far as my information about the inquest went. It seemed clear, from what you and the parson saw, that he had just played a shot with his brassie when he was struck down; it was lying near him, not in the bag. Besides, old Hyde actually saw the ball he had hit roll down the slope on to the green. Now, it's a good rule to study every little detail when you are on a problem of this kind. There weren't many left to study, of course, since the thing had happened four months before; but I knew Freer's clubs must be somewhere, and I thought of one or two places where they were likely to have been taken, in the circumstances, so I tried them. First, I reconnoitred the caddy-master's shed, asking if I could leave my bag there for a day or two; but I was told that the regular place to leave them was the pro's shop. So I went and had a chat with MacAdam, and sure enough it soon came out that Freer's bag was still in his rack. I had a look at the clubs, too."

"And did you notice anything peculiar about them?" Captain Royden asked.

"Just one little thing. But it was enough to set me thinking, and next day I drove up to London, where I paid a visit to Nelsons, the sporting outfitters. You know the firm, of course."

Captain Royden, carefully fining down the point of his pencil, nodded. "Everybody knows Nelsons."

"Yes; and MacAdam, I knew, had an account there for his stocks. I wanted to look over some clubs of a particular make—a brassie, with a slip of ivory let into the face, such as they had supplied to MacAdam. Freer had had one of them from him."

Again Royden nodded.

"I saw the man who shows clubs at Nelsons. We had a talk, and then—you know how little things come out in the course of conversation—"

"Especially," put in the captain with a cheerful grin, "when the conversation is being steered by an expert."

"You flatter me," Trent said. "Anyhow, it did transpire that a club of that particular make had been bought some months before by a customer whom the man was able to remember. Why he remembered him was because, in the first place, he insisted on a club of rather unusual length and weight—much too long and heavy for himself to use, as he was neither a tall man nor of powerful build. The salesman had suggested as much in a delicate way; but the customer said no, he knew exactly what suited him, and he bought the club and took it away with him."

"Rather an ass, I should say," Royden observed thoughtfully.

"I don't think he was an ass, really. He was capable of making a mistake, though, like the rest of us. There were some other things, by the way, that the salesman recalled about him. He had a slight limp, and he was, or had been, an Army officer. The salesman was an ex-Service man, and he couldn't be mistaken, he said, about that."

Captain Royden had drawn a sheet of paper towards him, and was slowly drawing little geometrical figures as he listened. "Go on, Mr. Trent," he said quietly.

"Well, to come back to the subject of Freer's death. I think he was killed by someone who knew Freer never played on Sunday, so that his clubs would be—or ought to be, shall we say?—in his locker all that day. All the following night, too, of course—in case the job took a long time. And I think this man was in a position to have access to the lockers in this clubhouse at any time he chose, and to possess a master key to those lockers. I think he was a skilful amateur craftsman. I think he had a good practical knowledge of high explosives. There is a branch of the Army"—Trent paused a moment and looked at the cigarette box on the table—"in which that sort of knowledge is specially necessary, I believe."

Hastily, as if just reminded of the duty of hospitality, Royden lifted the lid of the box and pushed it towards Trent. "Do have another," he urged.

Trent did so with thanks. "They have to have it in the Royal Engineers," he went on, "because—so I'm told—demolition work is an important part of their job."

"Quite right," Captain Royden observed, delicately shading one side of a cube.

"*Ubique!*" Trent mused, staring at the box lid. "If you are 'everywhere,' I take it you can be in two places at the same time. You could kill a man in one place, and at the same time be having breakfast with a friend a mile away. Well, to return to our subject yet once more; you can see the kind of idea I was led to form about what happened to Freer. I believe that his brassie was taken from his locker on the Sunday before his death. I believe the ivory face of it was taken off and a cavity hollowed out behind it; and in that cavity a charge of explosive was placed. Where it came from I don't know, for it isn't the sort of thing that is easy to come by, I imagine."

"Oh, there would be no difficulty about that," the captain remarked. "If this man you're speaking of knew all about H.E., as you say, he could have compounded the stuff himself from materials anybody can buy. For instance, he could easily make tetranitroaniline—that would be just the thing for him, I should say."

"I see. Then perhaps there would be a tiny detonator attached to the inner side of the ivory face, so that a good smack with the brassie would set it off. Then the face would be fixed on again. It would be a

delicate job, because the weight of the club-head would have to be exactly right. The feel and balance of the club would have to be just the same as before the operation."

"A delicate job, yes," the captain agreed. "But not an impossible one. There would be rather more to it than you say, as a matter of fact; the face would have to be shaved down thin, for instance. Still, it could be done."

"Well, I imagined it done. Now, this man I have in mind knew there was no work for a brassie at the short first hole, and that the first time it would come out of the bag was at the second hole, down at the bottom of the dip, where no one could see what happened. What certainly did happen was that Freer played a sweet shot, slap on to the green. What else happened at the same moment we don't know for certain, but we can make a reasonable guess. And then, of course, there's the question what happened to the club—or what was left of it; the handle, say. But it isn't a difficult question, I think, if we remember how the body was found."

"How do you mean?" Royden asked.

"I mean, by whom it was found. One of the two players who found it was too much upset to notice very much. He hurried back to the clubhouse; and the other was left alone with the body for, as I estimate it, at least fifteen minutes. When the police came on the scene, they found lying near the body a perfectly good brassie, an unusually long and heavy club, exactly like Freer's brassie in every respect—except one. The name stamped on the wood of the club head had been obliterated by crushing. That name, I think, was not F. MacAdam, but W. J. Nelson; and the club had been taken out of a bag that was not Freer's—a bag which had the remains, if any, of Freer's brassie at the bottom of it. And I believe that's all." Trent got to his feet and stretched his arms. "You can see what I meant when I said I found the mystery interesting."

For some moments Captain Royden gazed thoughtfully out of the window; then he met Trent's inquiring eye. "If there was such a fellow as you imagine," he said coolly, "he seems to have been careful enough—lucky enough too, if you like—to leave nothing at all of what you could call proof against him. And probably he had personal and private reasons for what he did. Suppose that somebody whom he was much attached to was in the power of a foul-tempered, bullying brute; and suppose he found that the bullying had gone to the length of physical violence; and suppose that the situation was hell by day and by night to this man of yours; and suppose there was no way on earth of putting an end to it except the way he took. Yes, Mr. Trent; suppose all that!"

"I will—I do!" Trent said. "That man—if he exists at all—must have been driven pretty hard, and what he did is no business of mine anyway. And now—still in the conditional mood—suppose I take myself off." □

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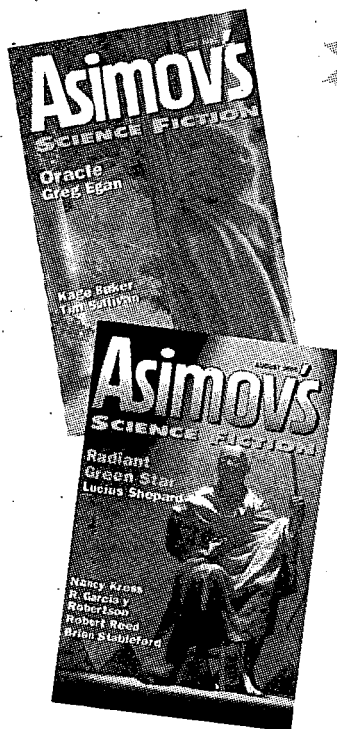
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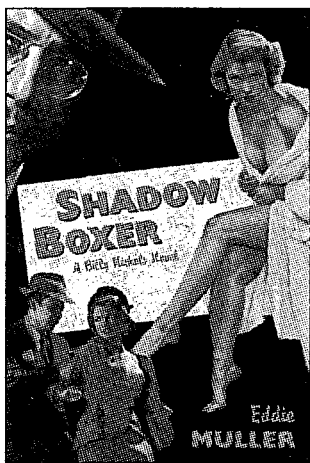
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Don Herron

Tough guy writing thrives, as an up-and-coming generation of authors muscles in on the hard-boiled and noir genres and works them into fresh shapes. Eddie Muller is one of the smoothest operators of this new crew with his mysteries about boxing reporter Billy Nichols. Host of the annual film noir festival at The Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood, Muller has done several non-fiction books on that subject, such as the recent *The Art of Noir* from Overlook Press, surveying lobby posters from that classic era of cinema. But he practically grew up with the Nichols novels, since they are based on his father, the senior Eddie Muller, who had one job in his entire adult life—writing about the pugilistic arts for fifty-two years for the San Francisco *Examiner*. Muller introduced Billy



Nichols in *The Distance* (2002), drawing an enthusiastic endorsement from *The Ring*, boxing's journal of record, so you know the entire sports dodge is solid.

Just out, the second novel in the series, **Shadow Boxer** (Scribner, \$24), picks up the action immediately on the heels of the first. The setting is San Francisco, 1948, and Billy, the boxing columnist for the *Inquirer*, has squeaked past jail (really, he shouldn't have had the idea of burying that dead body in Golden Gate Park) and is breathing easy. But then the luckless sap nabbed for the crimes tells him there is more behind the murders than has yet come out, and he's going to squeal on the witness stand. Virginia Wagner, the mysterious woman briefly encountered in *The Distance*, suddenly reappears, driving a fast car and packing a pistol. Some racket working under the name of the "Mount Davidson Trust" may be behind it all, and Billy knows he's going to have to ride it out again or risk losing his freedom.

A little weasel (but a loveable little weasel), Billy wants to contain news leaks and spin any revelations, and scrambles for footing as he races from covering a Golden Gloves tourney to Pacific Heights mansions, from an abortionist's lab to the hills of Sonoma County. Real-life characters such as the flamboyant lawyer Jake Ehrlich

figure in the case, and the Shah of Iran even pulls a cameo (though Billy admits, "I couldn't point to Iran on a map if you spotted me five continents."). The pace is fast, jazzy, with a touch of pulp ("She tossed the remnants of the tar-bar."). As Billy's jealous wife Ida tries to figure out what he is up to, Muller even manages to evoke vintage moments out of *I Love Lucy* and bring it off. And of course he touches on the noir mood more than once, as Billy thinks, "I've always felt memories had tangible weight. They're what the dead leave you to carry."

Jimmy Bench-Press (Carroll & Graf, \$24) is a fine follow-up to Charlie Stella's first crime novel, *Eddie's World* (2001), but unlike Muller's *Shadow Boxer* it isn't a novel I can recommend across the board to just any mystery reader. For this one you need a thick hide and a strong stomach, like Jimmy Mangino, the title character, who can bench-press four hundred pounds after years of working out in the pen. He's back outside now, in his old New Jersey-New York stomping grounds, trying to get in good with the local syndicate. When one of the Mafioso asks him about a lack of sex behind bars, Jimmy sets him straight. "Tranchatta made a face. 'Please,' he said. 'I just ate.'" Stella writes in the ultra-tough school where nothing good is about to happen to anybody, unless dumb luck intervenes. The prose is completely lean, reminiscent of the French noir master Jean-Patrick Manchette's tight behaviorist style: "A tall man with broad shoulders threw measured uppercut punches into the belly of a bloody man." The cast is large and unlikable, from Mangino and his fellow goons, including Russian and Korean gangsters trying to establish some turf, to organized crime cops Alex Pavlik and John DeNafria, with miscellaneous maimed bystanders. The action centers around Mangino wrecking havoc, as he is sent out to collect some loans that are overdue and on his own dime strong-arms his way into a porn operation. For those who enjoy unrelentingly hard-boiled novels ripe with lowlife, Stella delivers.

Jason Starr works more in the traditional noir vein, and he's so good at it I've decided the last thing on earth I'd want to be is the doomed protagonist in one of his novels. **Tough Luck** (Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, \$12) is his second trade paperback original after last year's *Hard Feelings*, released in this format in just recognition of Starr as one of the best followers in the footsteps of Jim Thompson, the bleak king of paperback noir. Here we find Mickey Prada, a nice young guy working in a fish market in Brooklyn, whose life may not be great but, hey, he's got money saved so he can go to college and better himself. Then Angelo Santoro starts coming in, encouraging Mickey to place a few sports bets for him. Since Santoro seems to be a made guy, our hero doesn't feel he can refuse the

(continued on page 142)

THE STORY THAT WON

The October Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Ray Chabot of Waterdown, Ontario, Canada. Honorable Mentions go to Rhonda Keith of Cincinnati, Ohio; Marguerite Alderson of Vista, California; Arnold A. Muniz of San Antonio, Texas; Eamonn



Loughman of Rye Brook, New York; LuAnn Bishop of West Haven, Connecticut; Lorna M. Kaine of Oviedo, Florida; Thomas H. Beaven of Garden City, Michigan; Bryan Steelman of Conover, North Carolina; and Deborah Hill of Mount Airy, North Carolina.

Hulton Archive

THE SWITCH by Ray Chabot

Lori merrily strolled along, admiring her beautiful ring. The final day of a perfect European holiday. Memorable because of Jason's proposal. Very romantic: quaint restaurant, delicious meal, and tears of joy. She anticipated tonight's encore of the special occasion. Same atmosphere, same succulent lamb dinner.

They had chosen this mountain hideaway for its simple lifestyle. A sleepy village with historical scenery and friendly rustic inhabitants. Lori peered into a dusty window and beheld a tangle of wires suspended over a chair. It reminded her of an old-fashioned beauty salon. She gazed at her reflection and decided to have her hair styled for Jason.

The beautician spoke no English. An elaborate series of hand signals and hair pulling found Lori seated in the chair. The clips were connected to her hair. This is fun, thought Lori as she giggled. The hairdresser reached for the switch.

CLICK! The wires hummed. Lori tensed and felt apprehensive until a pleasant surge of energy tingled her scalp. She dreamt of that evening's engagement celebration. Strangely, Lori developed an intense craving for a banana.

Sheets draped the doorway behind Lori, concealing a replica parlour. An uneasy, trembling chimpanzee sat in this chair. Duplicate cables were attached to his head. The chimp suddenly relaxed as a soothing electrical current enveloped his brain. A puzzled expression appeared on his face, and a banana slipped from his grasp. He had a curious desire for a lamb chop.

(continued from page 140)

offer, and he sinks rapidly into debt as Santoro ignores his losses. Desperate for a way out of the situation, Mickey gets in on a house burglary for some quick cash. The wrong-side-of-the-bridge New York scene is perfectly wrought, with OTB parlors and bowling alleys (You know Mickey is headed for trouble when his burglary crew is also his bowling team.). Deftly, Starr turns this one more into a black comedy than the regulation crime caper one might expect—he's not churning out the same old same, he's keeping it fresh, and fresh is very good.□

Cornelius LeHane's first novel, **Beware the Solitary Drinker** (Poisoned Pen, \$24.95), is set in a dive called Oscar's on New York City's Upper West Side, where a tired bartender named Brian McNulty serves his regulars their booze and marks time. The year is 1982, and Brian is part of the collective hangover from the seventies. His attempt at family life has failed, the future holds little promise, and most of his energy goes toward observing the tawdry rituals of bar life and drinking himself numb. When an energetic young woman named Angelina starts frequenting Oscar's, her promiscuity brings some cheer to the motley drunks whom Brian serves nightly. For Brian, however, the chaste nights she spends on his couch mean the possibility of real friendship. The discovery of Angelina's body in Riverside Park dashes those hopes, and Brian hits rock bottom: "Drinking in the morning to stop the shakes—a new horizon loomed." It soon becomes clear that the list of suspects in Angelina's murder is as long as Oscar's bar. Nearly all of the winos had motive and opportunity, and when the cops wrongly arrest a harmless musician named Danny, a reluctant Brian joins forces with the dead woman's older sister, Janet, to discover the truth. Their search through the seedy underbelly of mid-eighties Manhattan uncovers the dark secrets of Angelina's short life and sparks an attraction between them that neither wants, and that neither can resist. But as in many New York stories, there is no happy ending, only a bittersweet new beginning for Brian. LeHane's narrative vividly evokes a melancholy city in decline, and a sullen man who, when forced to act, rises above the alcoholic despair that surrounds him.

—Jonas Eno-Van Fleet

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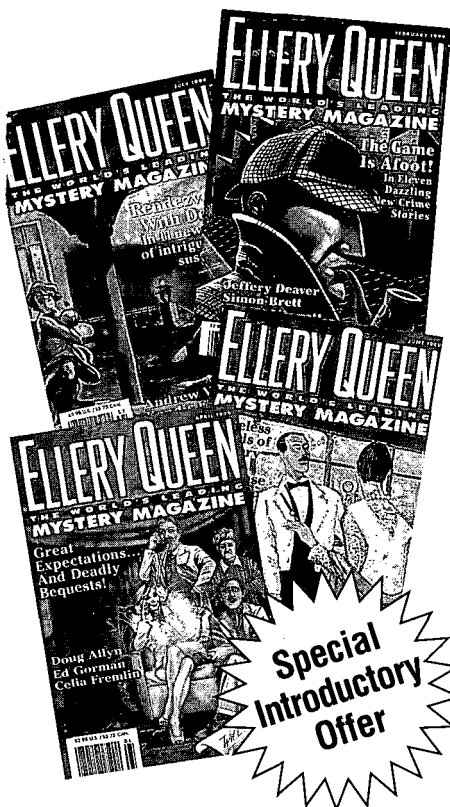
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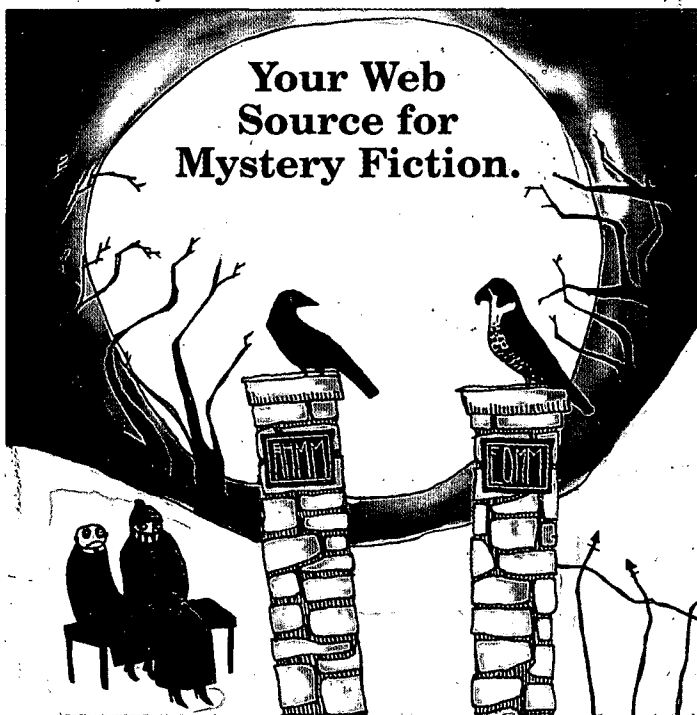
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